

## Józef Naumowicz

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

ORCID 0000-0002-9201-0235

### Decoding the Christian Era of Dionysius Exiguus<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** As yet, no satisfactory explanation has been found as to how the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus determined the year of Jesus' birth in his system of calculating years, which he introduced in 525. This is because two unwarranted assumptions prevail in research: first, that the creator of this calculation did not provide a justification for it, and second, that the solution to the problem should only be sought in this author's works on the calculation of Easter dates. In this article, the following research hypothesis has been adopted: the explanation of the new calculation of years is to be found in the writings of Dionysius, which include his computational but also theological works. An analysis of these writings makes it possible to discover the historical and theological rationale that became the actual basis for setting the date of Jesus' birth to the year corresponding to today's AD 1.

**Keywords:** Dionysius Exiguus, Christian era, date of Jesus' passion, theopaschites, Scythian monks, paschal computation, Easter tables

---

One of the greatest puzzles in the study of chronological systems is the question of how the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus calculated the year of the birth of Jesus in the year calculation system created in 525, which, despite repeated criticism, is still in use today. Researchers commonly conclude that the creator of this calculation himself did not give its explanation.<sup>2</sup> And therefore they put forward various theories attempting to solve this puzzle. Most often they

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Polish by Maciej Górnicki.

<sup>2</sup> Such an opinion is widely repeated in relevant studies, e.g. Holford-Strevens, *The History of Time*, 48: "Dionysius treats his Incarnation date as unproblematic and uncontroversial, neither explaining how it is known nor claiming it as his own discovery."

suggest that Dionysius determined the year either on the basis of historical calculations, or fitted it into existing chronological or computational systems,<sup>3</sup> and finally that he may have taken the date from other sources.<sup>4</sup> However, the matter is still unclear and still subject to debate. There has even been a statement that “the precise rationale” for Dionysius’s system “has long puzzled modern scholars and will probably never be explained to everyone’s satisfaction.”<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I have adopted the following research hypothesis: the explanation of Dionysius’ reckoning is to be found in the writings of this author, which must be placed in the historical but also theological context of the era. Indeed, the previous research into this calculation has been limited to an analysis of Dionysius’ computational writings, forming the well-known collection entitled *Book on Easter-reckoning* (*Liber de Paschate*), in particular: the dedicatory letter addressed to Bishop Petronius, the new paschal table (*Cyclus decemnovennalis*), setting the dates of Easter over a period of 95 years (AD 532–626), and finally the set of computational formulas entitled *Argumenta paschalia*.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for a full interpretation of Dionysius’ Christian era, his theological writings must also be taken into account. This is especially true of his translations into Latin of several letters of Cyril of Alexandria, the treatise of Proclus of Constantinople *Ad Armenios* and the like. The choice of these writings, which contain a polemic against Nestorian Christology, and the introductions with which Dionysius preceded each of these translations, indicate the theological ideas that were close to his heart and

---

<sup>3</sup> Presentation of the various attempts to explain Dionysius’ calculation: Declercq, *Anno Domini*, 112–130; Mosshammer, *Easter Computus*, 339–437. I have also discussed these theories in my work *Geneza chrześcijańskiej rachuby lat*, 147–153.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mosshammer, *Easter Computus*, 340, 420–437 (affinity with Julius Africanus’s nativity date); Declercq, “Dionysius Exiguus,” 237: “In our opinion, Dionysius has deliberately tampered somewhat with the ‘historic’ date for Christ’s birth he found in his source (in all probability the chronicle of Eusebius/Jerome).” On the dependence on the *Chronicle* of Eusebius, see also McCarthy, “The Emergence of Anno Domini,” 31–53.

<sup>5</sup> Nothaft, *Dating the Passion*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> More on the writings of Dionysius and his Easter calculation, see Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus*, 58–108, 339–437.

that also influenced his system of reckoning of years. A fuller analysis of these texts, including the theological ones, makes it possible to discover the essential foundations that allowed Dionysius not only to introduce the calculation from the incarnation, but also to set the date of Jesus' birth to a year corresponding to today's AD 1.

### **1. New Reckoning of the Years *ab Incarnatione Christi***

Firstly, it is necessary to recall some facts about Dionysius' computational work, in which the Roman monk introduced a new calculation of years.

Around 525, he was asked by the papal chancellery to create a table of Easter dates compatible with Eastern calculations. It was not surprising that he was assigned this task. For he had an excellent knowledge of Greek and Latin (perhaps he had acquired this proficiency as a child, since he came from Scythia, which lay on the border between the two languages), he had already translated Alexandrian computational writings, and he was familiar with Alexandrian and Greek theology in general. He now undertook the task of resolving the differences in the dating of Easter that arose in the two then main centres of Paschal calculation, Alexandria and Rome, having different systems of calculating these dates. Dionysius decided to adapt for the West the Alexandrian methods of Paschal computation, including its main principles: he used the 19-year solar-lunar cycles as the basis of the calculation, adopted the same dates for the "lunar leap," the boundary dates of the Paschal moon (15–21) and Easter (22 March – 25 April), etc.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, he introduced one innovation, concerning not the calculations of the Easter day itself, but the reckoning of the years, which had only an auxiliary significance (it only indicated to which year the Paschal calculations referred). The Alexandrian table, which he decided to continue and which he assigned to Cyril of Alexandria, used the era of Diocletian (*Anni Diocletiani*), calculated from the beginning of that ruler's reign, i.e. from the autumn of 284. This era also coincided with the course of the 19-year cycles, which began

---

<sup>7</sup> Nothaft, *Scandalous Error*, 42–50.

their course with the beginning of this computation. The Diocletian era was therefore convenient from a computational point of view. It was used to number the years in Alexandrian Paschal calculations, and was adopted by the Alexandrian bishops, as the Easter letters of Athanasius the Great or Cyril of Alexandria indicate. It was so important that the course of 19-year cycles combined with the Diocletian era served for various chronological constructions, including the creation of the world era of Anianos of Alexandria.<sup>8</sup>

The “Cyrillan table” indicated Easter dates up to the year 247 of Diocletian (AD 531). It was therefore still in current use in AD 525 when Dionysius created his table. For this reason he first copied the last part of this table, already known in the Latin version, and in it he left the original calculation of the years, i.e. *Anni Diocletiani*. On the other hand, in the table which he himself composed as a continuation of the Alexandrian table, he rejected counting the years from Diocletian, as he explained, because of the bad associations associated with the name of this emperor, a persecutor of Christians:

*Quia vero sanctus Cyrillus primum cyclum ab anno Diocletiani centesimo quinquagesimo tertio cœpit et ultimum in ducesimo quadragésimo septimo terminavit, nos a ducesimo quadragésimo octavo anno ejusdem tyranni potius quam principis, inchoantes, noluimus circulis nostris memoriam impiï et persecutoris innectere, sed magis elegimus ab incarnatione Domini nostri Jesu Christi annorum tempora prænotare...*

Because however saint Cyril began the first cycle [of 19 years] from the 153rd year of Diocletian, and ended the last cycle in 247th, we, starting from the 248th year of that same tyrant, rather than emperor, did not want to connect the memory of impious man and persecutor to our cycles, but chose rather to mark the course of the years from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus*, 190–203; Кузенков, “О происхождении,” 117–165.

Dionysius therefore began his Easter-table “starting from the 248th year of that same tyrant,” but instead of the 248th year of Diocletian he entered the year 532 from the Incarnation. He thus introduced a new count of *Anni Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*. This is the main research problem, as yet unexplained: on what basis did the Roman monk equate the 248th year of the Diocletian era with the year 532 “from the incarnation.”

## 2. “In the Second Year of the 19-year Cycle”

While introducing the calculation of the years “from the incarnation” of Jesus, Dionysius had several possibilities for establishing its starting point. The most logical would have been for him to place the incarnation of Christ in the first year of the relevant 19-year cycle. It would have been enough to precede the Diocletian era with 15 such cycles to reach the year of the consulship of Lentulus and Pison (1 BC) and to place the birth of Jesus in that year. Then the Incarnation would start a 19-year cycle, just as it was in the Diocletian era used in Alexandrian reckoning. In that case, he should take the year 533, not 532, as the beginning of his table (since the 532-year cycle, comprising 28 19-year cycles, ended then, so the next cycle should begin in 533).

Yet, Dionysius Exiguus placed the Incarnation of Jesus not in the first year of the 19-year cycle (1 BC) but, what should be strongly emphasized, in the second (1 AD). It is a fact that in doing so he lost important symbolism. For the year of Jesus’ birth did not start with the beginning of the 19-year cycle, but fell a year later. The Roman monk was also aware that he had lost an important asset that the Diocletian era had: for in that era, when one had to calculate what the year of the 19-year cycle was at a given point in time, one had to divide the given year of that era by 19, with the remainder indicating the correct result. Now, to a given year of the era of the Incarnation, one had first to add one, then perform the same action.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Dionysius Exiguus writes about this in *Argumenta paschalia*: “If you want to know which year it is in the 19-year cycle, take the years of the Lord (*annos Domini*), say 525, in the 19-year year cycle and always add one (*et unum semper*

The Anglo-Saxon scholar Venerable Bede († 735) read Dionysius' system correctly. He clearly stated that the Roman monk had placed the incarnation of Jesus in the second year of the 19-year cycle:

Placing the 532nd year of our Lord's Incarnation at the beginning of his first cycle, he plainly taught that the second year of his cycle (*manifeste docuit secundum sui circuli annum*) was the same as that when the mystery of the same most holy Incarnation began. ... Therefore, because the 532nd year from the Lord's Incarnation is complete in the second year (*secundo anno*) of the first cycle composed by Dionysius, it is without doubt the one in which He deigned to become incarnate, at far as the revolutions of the stars are concerned.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Bede rightly observed that this "second year" was significant. For he knew that after 532 years, the Paschal parameters repeat: the first spring full moon and Easter fall on the same days of the week and month. Therefore, he concluded that in 533, "in the second year of the first cycle composed by Dionysius," the same date of the Jewish Passover falls (Friday, 25 March) as in the year that Dionysius adopted as the year of the incarnation (AD 1). Hence Bede drew a correct conclusion: "All these things were exactly the same then (*omnia tunc fuere simillima*), and had there been an Easter falling upon a Sunday at that time, after the Church's present custom, that day would have come in the way noted here on the 6th kalends of April [27 March], and the Moon would have been 16 days old."<sup>11</sup>

Bede was therefore aware that the date of Passover in the year of Jesus' birth (according to Dionysius' era) coincided with the daily dates of Jesus' Passion, but he did not notice that this coincidence was due to a deliberate choice by Dionysius. Similarly, some modern

---

*adiece*), yielding 526. Divide those by 19, 13 are left over. The year is the thirteenth in the 19-year cycle" (*Argumentum V*: Krusch, *Studien*, II, 76 [PL 67, 501]).

<sup>10</sup> Bede, *De temporum ratione*, 47 (Wallis, 126–127).

<sup>11</sup> Bede, *De temporum ratione*, 47 (Wallis, 126–127).

scholars point to this coincidence, but treat it as coincidental, failing to note that it forms one of the bases of the Roman computationalist.

In fact, Dionysius placed the incarnation and birth of Jesus in 1 AD, not 1 BC. His writings indicate that he did not do so accidentally, but consciously and intentionally. He had reasons for adopting such a year. He gave these reasons himself and they are the key to interpreting his conception.

### 3. The Key Paschal Parameters: The Friday of the Passion and the Sunday of the Resurrection

It is now necessary to pay closer attention to a further explanation of the reckoning given by Dionysius himself, which has so far not been given its proper significance in research into the origins of the Christian era. In the letter to Bishop Petronius quoted above, the Roman computationalist not only stated why he had introduced a new system of counting the years, but also indicated what principles guided him in establishing the beginning of the new reckoning. The explanation is brief, but clear enough:

*magis elegimus ab incarnatione Domini nostri Jesu Christi annorum tempora prænotare, quatenus exordium spei nostrae notius nobis existeret, et causa reparationis humanae, id est, passio Redemptoris nostri, evidentius eluceret.*<sup>12</sup>

we chose rather to mark the course of the years from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that the beginning of our Hope might be the more evident to us and the cause of the human reparation, that is the Passion of our Redeemer, should shine forth more clearly.

---

<sup>12</sup> Krusch, *Studien*, II, 64. Misinterpretation of Dionysius' explanation: "This last phrase is a studied insult to Victorius, whose own tables were dated from the Passion" (Blackburn – Holford-Strevens, *The Oxford Companion to the Year*, 778).

This brief statement by Dionysius should be analysed. It is clear that the Roman monk's intention was for the new reckoning of the years to recall first and foremost "the beginning of our Hope," and thus to commemorate the moment of the Saviour's coming into the world. If, however, the Roman monk had set his reckoning with only this single purpose, he would probably have adopted the determinations of the year of Jesus' birth that were best known and that, on the basis of the premises contained in the Gospels, were most often given by earlier ecclesiastical authors. In that case, he would have had to place the beginning of his reckoning two years earlier (2 BC). He was certainly familiar with these findings prevalent in patristic writings, but more important to him was the theological significance of the new reckoning. The move of the date two years forward was determined by his second objective for the new era. It was also to recall "the cause of man's restoration, that is, our Redeemer's Passion."

This mysterious second purpose, formulated by Dionysius, can only be understood in one way: his reckoning of the years must also have indicated the date of the Passover, which fell in the year of Jesus' birth. In the second year of the first 19-year cycle (equivalent to the year of the birth), as Dionysius' table shows, there are significant Paschal parameters: the fourteenth Paschal Moon then falls on 25 March, Easter Sunday on 27 March, and the moon on that Sunday is on the 16th day of its cycle (*Luna XIII paschalis – VIII Kal. Apr.; dies dominicae festivitatis – VI Kal. Apr.; Luna ipsius diei dominici – XVI*).<sup>13</sup>

Dionysius knew that the same date for Pascha occurred 532 years earlier, the year he chose as 1 AD. Three elements of this date are important here, being key parameters in the calculation of Easter dates at least in the Roman Church and in the West generally. The first two are optional, the third immutable.

Firstly, Dionysius assumed after the Gospel of John that Jesus suffered the Passion on the day of preparation for Passover (14 Nisan or a fourteenth Paschal Moon, or 14th day of the Moon of the first lunar month in spring), when the lambs destined for the Passover

---

<sup>13</sup> Dionysius Exiguus, *Liber de Paschate, Cyclus decemnovennalis* (Krush, 70).



meal were killed and sacrificed. This symbolic date allowed for a better comprehension of the relationship between the sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament and “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It is a fact that the second date of the Passion, as indicated in the synoptic gospels, was also known: according to them, Jesus was crucified on the first day of Passover (15 Nisan). This date also appeared in the computational accounts. For example, Proterius patriarch of Alexandria, in a letter to Pope Leo the Great – translated into Latin by Dionysius – wrote that 14 Nisan represents the commemoration of the Paschal supper, while Jesus was crucified on the following day, 15 Nisan.<sup>14</sup> Dionysius Exiguus, on the other hand, in accordance with Western tradition, assumed that the Passion of Jesus occurred on the fourteenth Paschal Moon.

The second element of the Passover date in the year of Jesus’ birth was also important: it fell on 25 March (the eighth day before the Kalends, *VIII calendas Aprilis*). On this day, which Julius Caesar’s Roman calendar used as the date of the vernal equinox, Western Christian authors placed the day of Christ’s Passion. This was accepted by Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, Lactantius and St Augustine.<sup>15</sup> The day of 25 March did not lose its symbolic significance even when, at the beginning of the 4th century, Alexandrian scholars – trying to synchronise the calendar date of the equinox with natural phenomena – established that the equinox actually fell on 21 March. The day continued to be regarded as the anniversary of the creation of the world, sometimes, especially in the Western tradition, as the day of Jesus’ passion or, as in the *Chronicle* of Annian of Alexandria, of His Resurrection. When the December feast of Christmas on 25 December was established in the fourth century, 25 March also became the commemoration of Mary’s annunciation and Jesus’ conception.

---

<sup>14</sup> Proterius of Alexandria, *Letter to Pope Leo I* (PL 54, 1084–1094).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 28.54: *Mortuus est ergo Christus duobus Geminis consulibus VIII kal. Aprilis*. On the popularity of 25 March in the Western calculation of Easter, see Nothaft, *Dating the Passion*, 47–65; Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology*, 282–286.

These two elements of the Passover date, even if they were taken into account in Christian reckoning, could be variable. For the Passion of Jesus could have fallen on 14 or 15 Nisan, according to the Roman calendar, on or near 25 March.

What was immutable, however, was the third element of the Passover date: Jesus' passion took place on a Friday. The Gospels, as well as the liturgical and theological tradition of the first centuries, were unanimous in claiming that Christ rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, called the Lord's Day (Sunday), and that this took place on the third day after his death. The Passion therefore took place on Friday, the eve of the Sabbath. The Paschal reckoning therefore had to be structured so that, in the year of Jesus' death, 14 Nisan fell on a Friday, called Good Friday in the Church tradition, and 16 Nisan on a Sunday (or, by analogy, 15 Nisan on a Friday and 17 Nisan on a Sunday). This principle was carefully followed in the Paschal calculations, starting with the oldest authors. Other data were made to conform to it. Hippolytus of Rome first established the year in which the Passion of Jesus could be placed on Friday, 25 March, in order to place the year of Jesus' birth and the dates of other biblical events in relation to that year. Likewise, the author of the computation of 234: he first had to fix the date of the Passion (Friday, 28 March) in order to arrange the chronology of the history of salvation in relation to it – by means of the Paschal cycles. To these data (Jesus' death on Friday, resurrection on Sunday) all the computationalists adjusted their reckoning. In this respect, there could be no other options.

#### **4. Daily and Annual Date**

The three Paschal parameters mentioned above (the vernal full moon, 25 March and Friday, the sixth day of the week) were important reference points in determining the day of Jesus' Passion, especially in the Western tradition. In Dionysius' system of Easter reckoning, these parameters do not occur in the year of Jesus' Passion, but in the year that the Roman monk chose for the date of the incarnation. This coincidence was pointed out by G. Declercq, but he did not consider it significant, but coincidental: "In the case of Dionysius it

looks more like a fortunate coincidence and we do not know whether he bothered.”<sup>16</sup>

Dionysius, however, deliberately placed the date of the Incarnation in a year in which the first vernal full moon (14 luna) falls on Friday 25 March. He chose this year, even if he had to move the date of the Incarnation two years forward from the date considered most likely in the patristic period. However, with this scheme, his reckoning of the years was able to bring to mind both the beginning of hope (the coming of Jesus into the world) but also the basis of redemption, namely the Passion of Jesus. These purposes determined the beginning of the reckoning, which is referred to as the Christian one.

Moving the annual date of an event in view of the requirements of daily dates in computational calculations was not something unusual. This was the case with Victorius of Aquitaine, who, for similar reasons, shifted by one year the beginning of the “Passion Era,” i.e. the reckoning of years from the Passion of Jesus, which he used in his Easter table, compiled in 457. This is significant: Victorius modelled his calculations on those of his friend Prosper of Aquitaine, who, in his *Chronicle* completed two years earlier, had adopted a concept that can be considered traditional in the Roman Church, namely that the crucifixion occurred in the consulship of the two Gemini, C. Fufius and L. Rubellius (29 AD).<sup>17</sup> However, Victorius could not accept this year: in his Paschal table in 29 AD Pascha fell on 15 April. This did not correspond to his computational concepts, which he wrote about in the prologue to his table.

---

<sup>16</sup> Declercq, *Anno Domini*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> As late as the fifth century, Prosper of Aquitaine argued that a more common tradition placed the date of Jesus’ death under the Geminis. *Epitome Chronicæ* 388: “Some say Jesus suffered in the 18th year of Tiberius, and they prove it from the Gospel of St. John, from which it can be concluded that after the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, the Lord preached for three years (*post XV annum Tiberii Caesaris triennio dominus praedicasse*). Since the more common tradition (*usitatio traditio*) holds that our Lord was crucified in Tiberius Caesar’s 15th year, two Gemini being consuls (*XV anno Tiberii Caesaris duobus Geminis consulibus*), we, without prejudicing the other opinion, have commenced the list of subsequent consuls from the aforementioned consulship” (Mommsen, 409–410). Nothaft, *Dating the Passion*, 74.

The Passion of Jesus had to occur on 25 March. He reminded his audience that this date commemorates the creation of the world, for it is the day “on which the world, it is assumed, was established” (*quo mundus traditur institutus*). This was also the day on which the first Passover took place during the Exodus from Egypt. For then, the 14 of Nisan fell on 25 March, although, as Victorius explained, the Passover then did not begin until the evening of that day, since “the Hebrews performed the sacrifice of the lamb at the beginning of the night,” so it was actually already 26 March. According to Victorius – a similar situation occurred in the year of Jesus’ passion: On 25 March, the fifth day of the week (*quinta feria*), Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, at which he revealed “the sacraments of his flesh and blood,” in the evening he went to the Mount of Olives, where he was betrayed and arrested, “on the next sixth day, that is, 26 March (*sexta feria subsequente, id est VII. Cal. aprl.*) he was crucified and buried, and on the third day, that is, 28 March, Sunday (*dominica*) he rose from the dead.”<sup>18</sup> These findings did not correspond with the Paschal day dates set out in the table for AD 29. Instead, they correlated with the Paschal data for AD 28. For these reasons, he moved the dating of the consulship of the two Gemini one year earlier than was the case with Prosper and other historians.

Similarly, computational considerations, but also, as we shall see further on, theological and historical, were the main basis for the fact that Dionysius Exiguus placed the incarnation of Christ in the second year of the relevant 19-year cycle and adopted it as 1 AD. For at that time, Pascha occurred on Friday 25 March, recalling the Passion of Jesus which happened 33 years later.

### 5. Unity of the Incarnation and Passion

Thus, it is clear from Dionysius’ writings that the reckoning of the years “since the Incarnation,” in his terms, was intended to recall both the birth of Jesus and his Passion. There is no doubt that this is a justification of a theological nature. It corresponds – which

---

<sup>18</sup> Victorius of Aquitaine, *Cursus Paschalis, Prologus*, 9 (Krusch, 24–25).

should be emphasised and which has not been taken into account in previous studies – with the Roman monk’s Christological concepts, which found their fullest expression in his works written in the context of the so-called theopaschitic disputes. Dionysius was associated with the main protagonists of this dispute, namely the Scythian monks. These, in turn, were in Rome between 519 and 520, seeking the support of Pope Hormisdas and trying to convince him of their theology.<sup>19</sup>

These monks were ardent supporters of the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, but they wanted to complement it in such a way that it could not be a point of reference for the Nestorians. To this end, they promoted the formula *Unus ex Trinitate passus est in carne* (“One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh”), which had been introduced by Proclus of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria in polemic with the Nestorians. This formula defended the truth of the union of the two natures in Christ, which the Nestorians had exaggeratedly separated. It emphasised the unity of the Incarnate Christ, pointing out that Jesus, who suffered on the cross, is the same person as the Logos, the second hypostasis of the Trinity.

Dionysius Exiguus translated into Latin the early writings of Cyril of Alexandria, unknown in the West, related to the anti-Nestorian polemic. In this way he tried to support the cause of his compatriots, the Scythian monks. Thus, in the dedicatory letter to the translation of Cyril’s letters to Succensus, addressed to the Scythian monks, he included praise of Scythia as a land of rich spirituality, firmly holding to the Catholic faith. He also pointed out that both of Cyril’s letters, which he translated, contain a clear interpretation of anti-Nestorian theology.<sup>20</sup> And indeed, these letters defend the doctrine

---

<sup>19</sup> To call their theology “theopaschitic” does not mean that they preached the suffering of God in His nature. McGuckin’s observation is correct: “The designation ‘Theopaschite’ originated as an insult among their enemies (notably the pro-Roman Acometae monks at Constantinople), but it is particularly misleading in so far as it suggests some form of theological connection with the third-century Patripassians, when there is no such relation whatsoever” (“The ‘Theopaschite Confession,’” 239).

<sup>20</sup> *Epistula ad Ioannem [Maxentium] et Leontium seu Praefatio in Cyrilli Alexandrini duarum epistolarum ad Succesum translatione*, in *Dionisii Praefationes* (Glorie, 55–56).

of the ontological union of divine nature and human nature in the one person of Jesus Christ. They argue that what Jesus Christ underwent as a human being, especially His passion and death on the cross, can also be attributed to His divine nature, which remains immutable and not subject to suffering (*impassibilis*). It is right, therefore, to say “that the Only-begotten Son of God [One of the Trinity] suffered in his earthly nature.” If one connects suffering only with Christ’s humanity, one thereby objects to acknowledging the Word of God “as the Saviour who gave his own blood for us but instead that Jesus, viewed as a distinct individual man, should be credited with that. Such an idea,” Cyril stressed, “overthrows the whole principle of God’s plan of incarnation and plainly misinterprets our divine mystery as manworship.”<sup>21</sup> The unity of Incarnation and Passion was also pointed out in Cyril’s letter to Nestorius (translated by Dionysius), which contains the famous anathema: “Whoever does not acknowledge God’s Word as having suffered in flesh, been crucified in flesh, tasted death in flesh [...] shall be anathema.”<sup>22</sup>

Dionysius Exiguus defended the basic theopaschitic formula “one of the Trinity” in the introduction to his translation of Proclus’ treatise *Tomus ad Armenios*. He insisted that the Trinity did not mean three substances, but three hypostases, and that therefore one of the hypostases of the Trinity, the Son of God, could be said to have suffered in his human nature. He opposed the “adherents of Nestorius” (*Nestorii sectatoribus*) who reject the claim that “Christ the Lord is one of the Trinity” (*unum de Trinitate*) and thus negate the truth that “God the Word was born according to the flesh of the blessed Virgin and that He did the other [works] for the redemption of the human race” (*ceteraque pro redemptione humani generis*).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Second Letter to Succensus* (Ep. 46), 3–4 (*Select Letters*, 91).

<sup>22</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius* (Ep. 17) (*Select Letters*, 33). Cf. *Epistola synodica s. Cyrilli et concilii Alexandrini contra Nestorium a Dionysio Exiguo latine translata* (PL 67, 18): “Si quis non confitetur Deum Verbum carne passum esse, et carne crucifixum [...], anathema sit.”

<sup>23</sup> Dionysius Exiguus, *Praefatio ad Felicianum et Pastorem in Procli Constantinopolitani Tomus ad Armenios*, in *Dionisii Praefationes* (Glorie, 64).

This formula was also defended by a collection of patristic testimonies entitled *Exempla sanctorum patrum*, attributed to Dionysius. This is clearly shown by the brief introduction, which was certainly formulated by the Roman monk:

When reason demands, we ought not to doubt the distinction of persons [in the Trinity], and that Christ the Word, the power and wisdom of the Father, is one of the Trinity just as before, so after the Incarnation because that Incarnation which he received for the redemption of the human race (*incarnatio illa quam pro generis humani redemptione suscepit*), just as he conferred nothing on Him, so also did not take from Him nothing; so that it would not be believed that the One who is one Person having both natures, is not one of the Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

This brief overview of Dionysius' theological writings shows that he was close to a theology called theopaschitic, which emphasised the unity of Christ.<sup>25</sup> The union of the two natures, divine and human was accomplished in the Incarnation, which, as Dionysius described in the theological works cited above, the Son of God assumed “for the redemption of mankind” (*pro generis humani redemptione*), or it was part of His works which He accomplished “for the redemption of mankind” (*pro redemptione humani generis*). The guarantor of this truth of the ontological union of these natures in Christ – as this author pointed out in justifying the new reckoning of the years – is “the Passion of our Redeemer,” which is the “cause of the human

---

<sup>24</sup> Dionysius Exiguus, *Exempla sanctorum patrum quod unum quemlibet <licet> ex beata trinitate dicere* (Glorie, *Scriptores 'Illyrici' minores*, 85). The publisher regarded Dionysius' authorship as doubtful (Glorie, *Scriptores 'Illyrici' minores*, 84). However, S. Frankl's arguments that Dionysius was in fact the author of the introduction to this collection of testimonies are correct, less so when it comes to the entire collection of these quotations: ... *magna cum probabilitate concludendum esse videtur Dionysium Exiguum revera... auctorem, vel saltem unum ex principioribus redactoribus esse* (“Florilegium de ‘Uno ex beata Trinitate’,” 21).

<sup>25</sup> I discuss the theological background of Dionysius' reckoning more extensively in my book, *Geneza chrześcijańskiej rachuby lat*, prepared for print in an English version.

reparation” (*causa reparationis humanae*). This unity of Incarnation and Passion, in the Roman monk’s view, was also to be recalled by the new reckoning of the years, which included the annual date of Jesus’ birth, but also the daily date of His crucifixion.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. The Necessity of a New Dating of the Birth of Jesus

In addition to the aforementioned theological reasons, the chronological problems that Venerable Bede pointed out in his *De temporum ratione*, which Dionysius must have encountered himself, may also have contributed to his own determination of the year of Jesus’ birth.

Bede knew well the principle that Passover dates repeat exactly every 532 years. Therefore, accepting that Jesus lived 33 years and a few months (from 25 December 1 AD to 25 March 34 AD), he must have assumed that the year 566 should have the same Paschal parameters in the Dionysius’ table as in the year of Jesus’ Passion. Then the first vernal full moon (luna 14) should fall on Friday 25 March. The author of *De temporum ratione* subtly pointed out that one would look in vain for such data in Dionysius’ table in AD 566:

And so, with the cycles of Dionysius open before you, should you find in the 566th year from the Incarnation of the Lord that the 14th moon falls on Friday the 8th kalends of April [25 March], and Easter on Sunday the 6th kalends of April [27 March], then give thanks to God, for He has granted that you find what you were looking for, just as He promised! For no catholic may doubt that the Lord mounted the Cross on Friday [...] and rose from

---

<sup>26</sup> It is a fact that in 519–520 Pope Hormisdas, largely under the influence of his advisers (especially his legates operating in Constantinople), did not accept the theology known as theopaschitic and even harshly criticised the Scythian monks themselves, but attitudes towards their theology began to change in Rome from the moment that Justinian, then a close associate of Emperor Justin, asked the pope for his support (*Letter from Justinian to Hormisdas*, 9 July 520, *Collectio Avellana* 196; Wojda, *Communion et foi*, 105–107). Finally, in 533, Pope John II accepted a decree from Emperor Justinian that was in accordance with the teachings of the first four councils and included a theopaschistic formula.



the dead on the first day of the week, that is, on Sunday [...] The opinion of many doctors of the Church that He was crucified on the 8th kalends of April [25 March] and rose on the 6th kalends of the same [27 April] is widely agreed upon as common knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

It is a fact that, according to Dionysius' table in AD 566 (and, correspondingly, in AD 34, the year of Jesus' Passion), the 14th paschal day of the moon fell neither on Friday nor 25 March, but on Sunday 21 March. Bede recognised this inconsistency but did not undertake to explain it. Despite this ambiguity, he approved of Dionysius' Easter table and created its continuation. He also adopted the Dionysian reckoning of years since the Incarnation and contributed decisively to its dissemination. In contrast, medieval authors, especially from the 11th to the 12th century, clearly attempted to correct Dionysius' reckoning:<sup>28</sup> they set new dates for the birth and death of Jesus so that the day of his Passion would be consistent with the biblical account, that is, that it would fall on a Friday.

Were the Paschal tables attributed to Cyril of Alexandria and, consequently, also to Dionysius constructed incorrectly? Certainly not. It is not possible that the Alexandrian computationalists did not take into account the well-known fact that Jesus' passion occurred on a Friday and the resurrection on the first day after the Sabbath.

The explanation is simple. At the turn of the third and fourth centuries, when the Alexandrian system of Paschal calculations was crystallising, a short chronology of Jesus' life was adopted: he lived 31 years, since "only for one year was he to preach his doctrine"<sup>29</sup>; he

<sup>27</sup> Bede, *De temporum ratione* 47 (Wallis, 128).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Verbist, *Duelling with the Past*, passim, esp. 13–354; Nothaft, "An Eleventh-Century Chronologer," 457–482; Nothaft, *Dating the Passion*, 113–201.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromateis* 1, 21, 145, 3 (Ferguson, 131): "That his preaching could not have lasted more than a year is written in the following passage: 'He sent me to preach the year of the Lord's favor'" (Luke 4:19 quoting Isa 61:1–2). The expression "the year of the Lord" had a theological rather than a temporal meaning, but second- to third-century authors read it in a chronological sense.

was born in the 42nd year of the reign of Octavian Augustus (2 BC), so he suffered the Passion during the consulate of the two Gemini (AD 29).<sup>30</sup> Thus, the date of the Passover in the year of Jesus' Passion should be sought in the Dionysius table not in the year 566, but in the year 561: then, in fact, the 14th day of the Paschal moon fell on a Friday, and two days later was the first day after the Sabbath (the day of the Resurrection).

Why, then, did Dionysius Exiguus not adopt such year of the Passion that was popular in Western tradition and part of Alexandrian calculations? The dating of the Passion to the time of the consulship of the two Gemini was adopted by Tertullian and Augustine, also by subsequent Latin chroniclers such as Jerome, Sulpicius Severus and Prosper of Aquitaine and which was accepted in the fifth century as the beginning of the Passion era.<sup>31</sup> However, at the time of the creation of the Christian reckoning of the years, it was difficult to maintain this concept. It was necessary to conform to the Gospels, according to which "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1) or in AD 29, Jesus was just beginning His public activity, which, according to St John's Gospel, lasted another three years. This principle was well understood by another Roman author contemporary of Dionysius, Cassiodorus, who in his Chronicle, written in 519 put the crucifixion in the fifth consulship of Tiberius (the emperor was consul for the fifth time in the eighteenth year of his reign, AD 31), noting that it took place on 25 March.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps

---

<sup>30</sup> These consuls are not mentioned in the Gospels, which show only that in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37), Jesus was baptised in the Jordan and was then about 30 years old (Luke 3:1, 23).

<sup>31</sup> Assuming that Christ died at the age of 33 during the Gemini's consulate (*Fufio Gemino et Rubellio Gemino consulibus*; AD 29), it had to be established that he was born in the 40th year after Augustus' reign (4 BC). This was assumed to be the case by some Gallic authors of the fifth century, such as Sulpicius Severus (*Chronica* II, 27, 1–2 [De Sennneville-Grave, 286–288] or the anonymous *Computation of 452 (Computatio a. CCCCLII [Mommsen, 153])*.

<sup>32</sup> Cassiodorus, *Chronica*, 634–635: *Tib. Caesar V cons. His cons. dominus noster Iesus Christus passus est VIII kal. Aprilis et defectio solis facta est qualis ante vel postmodum numquam fuit* [Mommsen, 136–137]. In his edition of *Chronica*, Klaassen preserves the version of Jesus' Passion in the fifth consulship of Tiberius (AD 31), but suggests adding the traditional and symbolic expression "duo Gemini"

following the example of Cassiodorus, Dionysius felt that it was not possible to adhere to the Passion era reckoned from the consulship of the two Gemini, since the crucifixion of Jesus took place at least three years after that consulship.

Moreover, in Dionysius' table in AD 561 (and, correspondingly, in AD 29), the fourteenth Paschal moon did indeed fall on a Friday, but only on 14 April. In such a case, an important element of the Western Paschal reckoning was lost: the combination of the date of Jesus' Passion with Friday 25 March.

It can then be assumed that Dionysius deliberately did not want to accept the ancient dating of Jesus' Passion, since it fell about three years after the consulship of the two Gemini. He was also aware of the Gospel data that in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (AD 29) Jesus was "about" (ὥσει) or "almost" 30 years old and was then beginning his public life. Taking this into account, the Roman monk chose a year of Jesus' birth that corresponded with the data of the Gospels (about 30 years of life in the 15th year of Tiberius) and which at the same time was more in line with his theological concepts: then the full Paschal Moon fell on Friday 25 March. And he set this year as the starting point of his reckoning, i.e. as the beginning of the years of *Anni Domini*. And it was for this reason that he was able to write that he adopted the reckoning "from the Incarnation," in order to mark in a stronger way the coming of God into the world, but also his Passion.

## Conclusion

An analysis of Dionysius' writings shows that he deliberately placed the birth of Jesus in the second year of the 19-year cycle, and therefore in the year corresponding to AD 1. This was determined, in my view, by historical considerations (as understood in that era), but also theological ones. The Roman monk wanted to be consistent with the data of the Gospels, according to which in the 15th year

---

immediately before the report of the crucifixion, even though the consuls "C Rubellius et C Fufius" [Gemini] are listed in this text three years before, in AD 29 (*Cassiodorus' "Chronica"*, 65, 123–126).

of the reign of Tiberius (AD 29) Jesus was “about 30 years old,” while at the same time he took into account the date of Passover, which, in the accepted year of Jesus’ birth, fell on Friday 25 March, as it did – according to the dominant patristic tradition – in the year of the Passion. He fixed this beginning of the reckoning, as he himself wrote of it, “so that the beginning of our Hope might be the more evident to us, and that the cause of the human reparation, that is the Passion of our Redeemer, should shine forth more clearly.” In this way, he was expressing a theological concept close to his heart that spoke of the unity of Jesus, the unity of His incarnation and passion. It should therefore be stated without any doubt that the basis of his system of the year count is the year of Christ’s birth and the daily date of His Passion.

### Dekodując chrześcijańską erę Dionizego Mniejszego

**Abstrakt:** Dotychczas nie znaleziono satysfakcjonującego wyjaśnienia, w jaki sposób rzymski mnich Dionysius Exiguus ustalił rok narodzenia Jezusa w swoim systemie rachuby lat, który wprowadził w 525 roku. W badaniach dominują bowiem dwa bezzasadne założenia: pierwsze, że twórca tej rachuby nie podał jej uzasadnienia, i drugie, że rozwiązanie problemu należy szukać jedynie w pracach tego autora dotyczących obliczania dat Wielkanocy. W tym artykule przyjąłem następującą hipotezę badawczą: wyjaśnienie nowej rachuby lat znajduje się w pismach Dionizego, do których należą jego prace komputystyczne, ale także teologiczne. Analiza tych pism pozwala odkryć historyczne i teologiczne racje, które stały się faktyczną podstawą ustalenia daty narodzenia Jezusa na rok odpowiadający dzisiejszemu AD 1.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Dionysius Exiguus, era chrześcijańska, teopaschici, mnisi scytyjscy, komput paschalny, tablice wielkanocne

### Bibliography

- Beckwith, R.T., *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian: Biblical, Intertestamental and Patristic Studies* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Christentums; Leiden – New York, NY – Köln: Brill 1996).
- Beda Venerabilis, *De temporum ratione* (eds. Th. Mommsen – Ch.W. Jones; Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 123B; 1977) 427–433; English version: Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* (transl. F. Wallis; Translated Texts for Historians 49; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1999).

- Blackburn, B. – Holford-Strevens, L., *The Oxford Companion to the Year: An Exploration of Calendar Customs and Time-Reckoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999).
- Cassiodorus, *Chronica* (ed. Th. Mommsen; Monumenta Germaniae historica. Auctores antiquissimi 11, *Chronica minora* 2; Berolini 1894) 109–161.
- Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromateis. Books 1–3* (transl. J. Ferguson; Fathers of the Church. A New Translation 83; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 1991).
- Collectio Avellana* (ed. O. Guenther; Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 35/I–II; Pragae – Vindobonae – Lipsiae 1895–1898).
- Computatio a. CCCCLII* (ed. Th. Mommsen; Monumenta Germaniae historica. Auctores antiquissimi 9, *Chronica minora* 1; Berolini 1892) 149–153.
- Cyril of Alexandria, *Select Letters* (ed. and trans. L.R. Wickham; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983).
- Declercq, G., *Anno Domini: The Origins of the Christian Era* (Turnhout: Brepols 2000).
- Declercq, G., “Dionysius Exiguus and the Introduction of the Christian Era,” *Sacris Erudiri* 41 (2002) 165–246.
- Dionysius Exiguus, ‘*Exempla Sanctorum Patrum*’. *Trifolius*. ‘*Confessio*’ sive ‘*Formula libelli fidei*’ (eds. S. Gennaro – F. Glorie; Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 85; Turnhout: Brepols 1972).
- Dionysius Exiguus, *Liber de Paschate (Praefatio, Cycclus decemnovennalis, Argumenta Paschalia)*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Migne 1865) 67, 483–508.
- Dionysius Exiguus, *Praefationes latinae genuinae in variis suis translationibus ex graeco* (ed. F. Glorie; Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 85; Turnhout: Brepols 1972) 27–81.
- Frankl, S., “Florilegium de ‘Uno ex beata Trinitate’,” *Collectanea Theologica* 15/1 (1934) 3–23.
- Holford-Strevens, L., *The History of Time: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006).
- Klaassen, M., *Cassiodorus’ “Chronica”: Text, chronography and sources* (A Dissertation in Classical Studies Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania; Dissertation Publishing 2010).
- Krusch, B., *Studien zur christlich-mittelalterlichen Chronologie*. I. *Der 84-jährige Ostercyclus und seine Quellen*. II. *Die Entstehung unserer heutigen Zeitrechnung* (Leipzig 1880; Berlin 1938).
- Кузенков, П.В., “*O происхождении александрийской эры [On the origin of the Alexandrian era]: (По поводу гипотезы А. Моссхаммера),”* Θεοδοῦλος. Сборник статей памяти проф. И.С. Чичурова (Moscow 2012) 116–170.

- McCarthy, D.P., “The Emergence of Anno Domini,” *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse* (ed. G. Jaritz – G. Moreno-Riaño; Brepols: Turnhout 2003) 31–53.
- McGuckin, J.A., “The ‘Theopaschite Confession’ (Text and Historical Context): A Study in the Cyrilline Re-interpretation of Chalcedon,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35/2 (1984) 239–255.
- Mosshammer, A.A., *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford – New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2008).
- Naumowicz, J., “La date de naissance du Christ chez Denys le Petit et les auteurs chrétiens antérieurs,” *Studia Patristica [Papers presented to the Eleventh International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999]* 25 (2001) 292–296.
- Naumowicz, J., *Geneza chrześcijańskiej rachuby lat. Historyczno-teologiczne podstawy systemu Dionizego Mniejszego* (Kraków – Tyniec: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów 2000).
- Nothaft, C.Ph.E., *Dating the Passion: The Life of Jesus and the Emergence of Scientific Chronology (200-1600)* (Time, Astronomy, and Calendars 1; Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill 2011).
- Nothaft, C.Ph.E., “An Eleventh-Century Chronologer at Work: Marianus Scottus and the Quest for the Missing Twenty-Two Years,” *Speculum* 88/2 (2013) 457–482.
- Nothaft, C.Ph.E., *Scandalous Error: Calendar Reform and Calendrical Astronomy in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).
- Prosper of Aquitaine, *Epitoma chronicon* (ed. Th. Mommsen; Monumenta Germaniae historica. Auctores antiquissimi 9, Chronica minora 1; Berlin 1892) 385–485.
- Proterius of Alexandria, *Letter to Pope Leo I on the Subject of Easter* [in the Latin translation of Dionysius Minor], in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Migne 1846) 54, 1084–1094.
- Sulpitius Severus, *Chronica* (text, trans., comm. Gh. De Senneville-Grave; Sources Chrétiennes 441; Paris 1999).
- Verbist, P., *Duelling with the Past: Medieval Authors and the Problem of the Christian Era, c. 990–1135* (Studies in the Early Middle Ages 21; Turnhout: Brepols 2010).
- Victorius of Aquitaine, *Cursus Paschalis*, in *Studien zur christlich-mittelalterliche Chronologie* (ed. B. Krusch; Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften 1938) 16–52.
- Wojda, J.L., *Communion et foi: les trois premiers voyages des papes de Rome à Constantinople (484–555). Etudes historique et théologique* (Siedlce: Editions P.P.H. Iwonex 2006).