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Ideas in Motion: Calendars in Motion—Dating Systems

As this book goes into production, it is the year 2026. But what does that mean? Obviously, the world has been around a lot longer than 2,026 years, so 2,026 years since what? The simplest answer is that our modern calendar, called the Gregorian calendar, considers this to be the 2,026th year since the birth of Jesus Christ.

The idea of using the birth of Jesus as a starting point for the calendar began in 525. Until then Europeans had largely used consulships to provide dates. Consuls were the highest officials in the Roman government. Thus someone might write that an event occurred in the consulship of Cicero. Later, events were dated using the regnal dates (that is, the dates of reign) of Roman emperors. Likewise, in China events were dated using the regnal dates of emperors. In 525 Dionysus Exiguus, a Christian scholar who wrote an Easter table (the Christian holiday of Easter falls on different dates each year, so tables are needed to know when it falls in any given year), numbered the years in his Easter table based on his estimate of when Jesus was born. (The precise date of Jesus's birth is unknown.) From this came the habit of designating years as either AD or BC. *AD* is an abbreviation for *anno domini*, Latin for "year of the Lord." In this case the Lord in question is Jesus; thus an event that happened 100 years after the traditional date of Jesus's birth is said to have happened in AD 100. If the event occurred 100 years before the traditional date for Jesus's birth, it would be 100 BC or "before Christ." It's also worth noting that there is no year 0; 1 BC was followed directly by AD 1. Properly AD should come before the year and BC after it and AD should be italicized because it is in Latin, a foreign language, while BC is not because it is English.

You may have noticed that we don't use either BC or AD. World historians are a little squeamish about these designations because they are so rooted in the European and Christian traditions. When writing about the world outside the West, it seems incongruous to use a Western and overtly Christian dating system. So, instead of AD and BC, we use CE and BCE. CE stands for "Common Era" and it substitutes for AD, while BCE stands for "Before the Common Era" and substitutes for BC. So 1000 BCE and 1000 BC are exactly the same year. And the tenth year of the Common Era and the tenth year of the Christian Era are the same year.

So, what's common about the Common Era? Is there some globally relevant historical process or event that puts the common in the Common Era? Nope. It's the same old Christian and European dating system, but now with new and more letters.

Are there other options? Archaeologists, who deal with larger chunks of time than historians, sometimes date things using the Before Present (BP) system. That works fine if you want to say that agriculture started around 10,000 BP. But the present moves forward a year every year, so for the BP system the "present" conventionally starts in 1950. "In 458 Columbus sailed the sea so great" just does not have the ring that "in fourteen hundred and ninety two Columbus sailed the ocean blue" does. And the BP system has no way of dealing with years after 1950, so more recent years would be a challenge.

What about non-Western dating systems? As I type, it is 1447 in the Islamic calendar. The Islamic calendar begins with the *hijra* in 622 when Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, fled from his home in Mecca to the city of Medina to escape persecution. Now if you have just added 622 to 1447 and then looked at the first paragraph again, you may have concluded that I write very slowly. No, it has not taken me forty-four years to write this feature. Rather, the years of the Muslim calendar, which are based on twelve lunar months, are

a little shorter than the one we use, which is based on the solar year. So there is no simple way of converting Muslim AH (*anno hegirae*) dates into the BC/AD or BCE/CE system.

In the end, there is no entirely unbiased or culturally neutral way to do dates in world history. The BCE/CE system seems like a reasonable compromise. So we use it.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways are calendars the products of the societies that create them?
2. Are some calendars more accurate than others?
3. Would it be possible to create a calendar that is free from cultural bias?

The Past in the Present: Knowledge, LiDAR, and the Place of the Americas in World History

Believe it or not, just a couple of hundred years ago there were hardly any historians. Really. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that knowing things about the past slowly began to be recognized as a legitimate way to make a living. As a result, most people knew little about the past beyond commonly held origin stories, popular myths, and family memory.

One outcome of this lack of attention to the past was that even though the very first Europeans to come to the Americas were duly impressed by the scope, organization, and architecture of various Native American societies (the first Spaniards in Mesoamerica were stunned by all the pyramids, for example), within a few generations this initial awe faded into the haze of the past. Really. Europeans in the Americas genuinely forgot that the Mayans and Aztecs, among others, built pyramids. This process was reinforced by the population collapse of the **Great Dying**, which lead to the abandonment of most Amerindian population centers and their reclamation by tropical forest environments. By the 1800s, the vast majority of Europeans had reimagined Native Americans as savages who had never known civilization until it was introduced by conquering Europeans.

In the 1840s, a handful of European proto-archaeologists gained fame by rediscovering some of the cities and monuments that had been overgrown and forgotten. This caused quite the sensation (Pyramids! Who knew?) among the tiny population of people who bothered to pay attention to such things, and it began a slow-motion sea change in attitudes regarding the capacity of Native Americans to do the sorts of things we think of as worthy of historical attention. By the middle of the twentieth century, the growth of history departments and Latin American studies programs had made it possible for scholars to once again talk about things such as Mesoamerican civilization.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, new historical and archaeological knowledge about the scope of Native American societies had been uncovered by thousands of research scholars spread out across thousands of universities. This new information led to a reappraisal of just how many Native Americans there had been prior to Columbian contact. During the 1980s, for example, that estimate was around 2 million. By the early 2000s, many scholars were advancing numbers in the tens or even hundreds of millions.

In recent years, the development of **remote sensing** technologies has led to staggering new discoveries. For example, in 2017 and 2018 a group of archaeologists used **LiDAR** and GPS-equipped aircraft to map hundreds of square miles of terrain beneath the rainforest in Guatemala. The survey revealed thousands of structures that had not yet been identified and catalogued. It was yet another "Pyramids!" moment, and it also led scholars to estimate that the region had once been home to perhaps 15 million people, rather than the 5 million previously estimated.

Question for Discussion

1. Why might so many Europeans have been so willing to accept the idea that the Americas had only been home to a tiny number of uncivilized people prior to 1492?

The Divine in Motion: The Bodhisattva Guanyin

A frequent charge against Confucianism is that its emphasis on women's subservience to male authority undermined women's spiritual power in China and elsewhere in East Asia. Many scholars have argued that Buddhism, in contrast, offered up a host of new possibilities for women, particularly through the institution of Buddhist nunneries, which allowed women to live lives of spiritual dedication, just as Buddhism allowed men. Similarly, Buddhism provided a source of legitimation for new elites in China, among them women such as the Empress Wu, who aspired to political power. In particular, the fact that women were included among the Buddhist pantheon of bodhisattvas has been pointed out as a powerful symbol of women's enhanced spiritual standing under Buddhism.

One of the most interesting examples of this dynamic is the **Bodhisattva Guanyin**. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Guanyin appeared as a male figure and as a Sinification of the Indian Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. However, by the Song dynasty, Guanyin was represented instead as a female, and was increasingly identified as the bodhisattva of compassion ("the one who listens to the cries of the world"). Veneration of Guanyin appears to have become a central component of Chinese Buddhism, and there are many different stories of how Guanyin achieved transcendence. Her spiritual influence was so great that Daoists came to revere her as an immortal, claiming that she had originally lived during the Shang era.

As Chinese-style Buddhism spread into Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, the goddess Guanyin became important in these regions too. In Korean she was known as Gwan-eum, in Japanese as Kannon, in Thai as Kuan-Eim, and in Vietnamese as Quan Am. Representations of Guanyin in painting and sculpture also diversified as they spread. A number even bear a striking resemblance to Christian depictions of the Madonna and Child, leading some to suggest that Nestorian Christians, too, influenced the development of this female deity. Taken as a whole, the development and spread of the veneration of Guanyin is an outstanding example of the flexibility and impact of ideas as they cross time and space.

Questions for Discussion

1. How might the development of female-gendered Buddhist and Daoist deities have created spiritual space for Chinese women?
2. How might the creation of a female Guanyin have made Buddhism more appealing to Chinese populations?