Herbert Illig – *Wer hat an der Uhr gedreht? Wie 300 Jahre Mittelalter erfunden wurden* [Who has tampered with the clock? How 300 years of the Middle Ages were invented; in German]

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Within historiography, 'historical revisionism' is the reinterpretation of orthodox views on evidence, motivations, and decision-making processes surrounding a historical event. Revisionists, such as the author of the book here under review, assume the interpretation of a historical event or period, as accepted by the majority of scholars, needs significant change. 'Historical revisionism' is certainly a legitimate approach within historiography once it is based on generally accepted facts.

However, there is also a danger when 'revisionism' results in the *distortion* of history, which – if it constitutes the denial of historical crimes – is sometimes also called 'negationism'. In 'revising' the past, this kind of *illegitimate* historical revisionism appeals to the intellect – via techniques illegitimate to historical discourse – to advance a given interpretive historical view. The techniques include presenting known forged documents as genuine; inventing ingenious, but implausible, reasons for distrusting genuine documents; attributing his or her own conclusions to books and sources reporting the opposite; manipulating statistical series to support the given point of view; and deliberately mis-translating texts (in languages other than the revisionist's). Practical examples of negationism include, for instance, the Holocaust denial by certain right-wing strata in the West and among certain extremists in the Muslim world on the one hand, and the 'rewriting' of the history of Palestine/Israel to the detriment of the Arab Palestinian population on the other. Some countries, such as Germany, have (rightly) criminalised the negationist revision of certain historical events.

The book here under review – published already in its sixth edition – is a piece of 'historical revisionism' and as such has recently caused significant upheavals among wider strata of readers not only in Germany where it was published first. The issue of the 'veracity' of its author's 'theories' would also have considerable significance to those involved in the Islamic studies industry, and as such a review of his book in this journal is certainly warranted. It is worthwhile to know that the book's first edition appeared just in time for the turn of the millennium (Munich: Econ and List Verlag, 1999) – usually a good time for 'visions' of and 'hopes' for the future, be it a new 'world era' or peace and happiness or apocalyptic doomsday predictions.

Illig claims to have 'discovered' the 'ultimate forgery': the invention of more than a quarter millennium in the Middle Ages, somewhere between the seventh and tenth

centuries. This would ultimately question the identity of one of the most revered icons and heroes of Western European history: Charlemagne, crowned in 800, the 'founder of Europe', who restored and resurrected the Roman title of 'Emperor' for the western half of the Old Continent, who created the (as a matter of fact often strained) 'working relationship' between the Roman Catholic Church and imperial rule, a relationship that lasted until the Reformation.

Illig is a proponent of the so-called 'phantom time hypothesis', a theory developed by him in 1991. This theory proposes that there has been a systematic effort to make it appear that certain periods of history (specifically that of Europe during the Early Middle Ages, from the early seventh to tenth centuries) exist – when they actually do not. Illig believed that this was achieved through the alteration, misrepresentation, and forgery of documentary and physical evidence. The theory also stems from the belief that during the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in Europe in 1582, while compensating for a ten day discrepancy in the old Julian calendar, many dates were falsely (or ineptly) recalculated as the new system created a 13 day discrepancy. Illig sees everywhere in the medieval records 'countless contradictions' and 'falsifications of history' and considers nearly 300 years as 'invented' years that were subsequently inserted into our calendar. Thus, when the champagne corks popped up in many Western homes on the eve of 1 January 2000 (in 'conventional reckoning', one is tempted to say), we had actually only been in the year 1703.

Illig's theories received widespread academic criticism. Various scholars and authors have proposed their own alternative time lines and 'phantom time' hypotheses – some varying only slightly from the accepted time line and others rewriting or reordering it significantly. 'Phantom time' hypotheses are typically disputed – and rejected – by historians who deserve that name. A common criticism is that those hypotheses serve as vehicles for the promotion of alternative agendas favouring one or more groups/causes with which the respective writer happens to be associated – in particular those from the extreme right-wing political spectrum.

Illig has provided us for quite some time with heated discussions about his provocative and fantastic theses, that 297 years of the Middle Ages (in particular the period from September 614 until August 911) did not take place, but rather are an invention and time forgery of the 'first millennium emperor' Otto III (reigned from 983 as King of the Germans and from 996 to 1002 as Holy Roman Emperor – once again, according to 'conventional reckoning') and his contemporaries. Outgrowths of this discussion are still gliding off into, at times, personal offence, in which Illig's thesis is compared by his worst opponents even to the 'Auschwitz lie', i.e. the denial of the existence of the horrifying Nazi death camps.

Be that as it may, according to Illig, we would have just entered the year 1711. What happened to the missing 297 years? Some background: in the papal bull *Inter gravissimas* of 1582, an elderly pope, Gregory XIII, ordered the reformation of the

Julian calendar upon which Christian chronology was based. On Thursday, October the 5th, ten days were added to the nominal date to synchronise the calendar with astronomic events, like sun, and moon eclipses. The next day, Friday then became the 15th of October. This 'revision', which gave birth to the Gregorian calendar, is still in use today. Strangely, however, only the error that had built up in the calendar since the year 300 was corrected – while the full miscalculation that had accumulated since the era of Julius Caesar and his calendar reform of 45 BCE was ignored. Gregory employed a large staff of scientists (including Johannes Kepler), who anchored the calendar revision on the observation of the vernal equinox on the 21st of March at the Nicean Church Council of 325. Historians claim that this council settled the method for determining the date of Easter, which is known as the *Computus*. However, according to Illig, there is no evidence that the council actually did this. Therefore, the period of time between Pope Gregory XIII and Julius Caesar seems to be roughly 300 years shorter than originally thought. In two German-language books – *Das erfundene Mittlealter* (The invented Middle Ages) and *Wer hat an der Uhr gedreht?*, here under review – Illig presents what he considers 'evidence' in support of his claim that 297 years of fictitious history were 'inserted by the Vatican' (a lapse by Illig, who failed to notice that the Vatican became only papal residence in the fourteenth century) to fill up the hole – a 'fake period' of time that Illig has dubbed 'Phantom Time'. According to him, there is no genuine proof for anything between 614 and 911. As it happens, these centuries are anyway referred to in common parlance as the 'Dark Ages' – as the historical entries are as rare as the archaeological finds.

But who has tampered with the clock? Illig makes out Constantine VII, emperor of Byzantium, and Otto III, Holy Roman Emperor, along with Pope Sylvester II, as the initiators and major culprits. Otto III wanted to be Jesus Christ's representative on earth at the dawn of the seventh millennium (that is to say, 6,000 years after the Creation, according to biblical reckoning). Sylvester II, who was enthroned by Otto, supported him with his knowledge of Arabian astronomy and mathematics. Otto's mother was an imperial princess from Byzantium, which explains his close relations to Constantinople. There too, three 'empty' centuries could be used well. The Persians had stolen the most important Christian relic, the Cross of Golgatha, in 614 – not to mention the following three centuries of disastrous defeats against the early Muslims which were stopped by the Byzantine recovery in the tenth century. Only within a fictitious timeframe could the return of the relic be explained – and the loss of large territories to the Arabs explained away.

Perhaps of somewhat more interest to the circle of readers of this journal is that Illig 'transfers' his 'phantom time hypothesis' also to other, *non*-Western, civilisations – such as the world of Islam – and apparently even China (this reviewer refrains from asking for Illig's credentials in terms of things Chinese…). Some

of the more sober-minded readers might already have questioned Illig's authority and competence in the realm of medieval European history, but what about the author's credentials in terms of Islamic Studies, for instance? Of particular interest to Muslims: Illig also considers the reign of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) – the famous contemporary of Charlemagne – as 'fictitious' and his very existence as 'fairy tale'. In this way, the Middle Ages are seen as partly having invented themselves. Only with this bold thesis the contradictions between historical attributions of buildings, findings, and documents could disappear. Such absurdities, however, cannot stand the test of reality as in particular al-Rashīd's reign is well-documented by Muslim historians of any persuasion, such as al-Ṭabarī (839–923), historians which remain beyond the reach of Illig, due to his lack of knowledge of Arabic – not to mention knowledge of Islamic civilisation.

In short, one wonders how a well-known and long established – although not necessarily reputable – German publishing house like Ullstein could have given any serious thought to publishing a work such as that here under review. The answer to this question might be sought in connection with what we have already said earlier: the approaching new millennium at the time when this book first went to the press and the popularity of a publisher who could come out 'right on time' with something 'thought-provoking', which Illig's work certainly is – although perhaps not in the way intended by its author…

In concluding, we might ask: "Should we throw historical revisionists in jail?" More concretely, should we also throw hobby-historian Illig in jail for claiming that Charlemagne, along with 300 years of medieval history, never existed? Would it sit well with those of us who take their work seriously to magnanimously look over and steer away from ideological debates of any colouring by letting people like Illig speak all they want? They may be gadflies but the bulk of evidence is usually *not* on their side. They are on the fringe and they will stay there. Let their websites stay up and let them give all the presentations they want. In the meantime, however, *professional* historians should continue to monitor those individuals and make the appropriate response when it is warranted – such as in the shameful case of holocaust and genocide deniers of various sorts and origin who should certainly be the subjects of legal investigation.