

Periodization, dividing the past into periods that can be clearly identified and that differ from one another in a recognizable way, is a subject for interminable discussion. Nevertheless, periodization, however arbitrary and subject to the personal preferences of the historian, is an unavoidable and even indispensable tool to give shape to the past, which would otherwise consist of an undifferentiated mass of facts and figures. Like comparisons, periodizations in principle are unlimited in number, but they only serve a purpose if they allow us to partition the stream of events in such a way that important developments become visible. This begs the question of which developments the historian sees as important enough to warrant basing his periodization on, or in other words, which among the great mass of facts he recognizes as 'historical facts'. Of course, in any given field there are traditional divisions that have become so widespread that the innocent reader tends to accept them as historical facts in themselves, not to say natural phenomena. First, it must have explanatory value.