Reply to Nockolds's Comment

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I have concluded that the lunar impact hypothesis is an unlikely interpretation of the observation reported in Gervase, and Nockolds (this issue) strengthens this point by suggesting that the observation itself may have been made up as "propaganda" associated with the crusades (Withers, 2001). I am not fluent in classical or medieval Latin and have seen nothing of Gervase's chronicle beyond the quotation in Hartung (1976). I would be delighted to see a fuller discussion of this issue which goes beyond Nockolds's short comment. Perhaps such a discussion already exists in the historical astronomy literature or the works of historians.

Nockolds also mentions the unfortunate problem of the (in)visibility of the Moon from Canterbury on the night in question. Meeus (1990) and Schaefer (1990) noted that the Moon would not be visible in Canterbury on the date usually associated with Gervase's dramatic account. Hartung (1993) reconciled this seemingly devastating observation with his favoured interpretation of Gervase's chronicle by stating: "Waddington (personal communication) has analysed the original Latin version of the Canterbury report and found that the correct date of the event may have been June 19, not June 18." After the

publication of Withers (2001), I discussed this with Graeme Waddington, who, in a posting to the Cambridge Conference Network (http://abob.libs.uga.edu/bobk/ccc/cc032801.html), elaborated on this interesting point. The crux of his argument is the translation of "die Dominica" by Hathorn in Hartung (1976). According to Waddington, "Here we note that Hathorn has followed Stubbs in the usual assumption that "die Dominica" refers to a Sunday, whereas in mediaeval (not medieval!) monastic tradition the phrase should more correctly be rendered as the Lord's day and as such may refer either specifically to a Sunday or, generically, to any ecclesiastical feast day (which included all sundays) in a monastry's liturgical calendar." Waddington identifies an ecclesiastical feast day on June 19 and also notes that a reference, "luna prima," to the first day of the lunar month, implying June 19 again, was translated by Hathorn as "when the moon had first become visible," implying moonrise on any day (Waddington, personal communication). However, as pointed out to me by Nockolds, Waddington's posting does not give any examples of this alternative use of "die Dominica." I presume that interested readers can find examples in the mediaeval literature.

References

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