

# THE MIDDLE AGE(S)

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## Periodieserung

*Periodieserung* is the term which the Germans (the first to study history at University level) use for the practice of splitting the past into periods. In his *English Historical Documents* (1967) C.H.Williams wrote that they made an 'industry' of this, and took it very seriously, whereas the English did not; but for Williams the choice of the right period was still more than a matter of convenience:

The vitality of historical writing derives strength from constant revisions caused by the discoveries of research, and very often some suggestions inspired by periodisation provide a new approach.

The giving of a name to a band of time is inevitably a broad generalisation. The choice reflects the historian's culture and preoccupations, and a name which is suitable for one geographical area may not make much sense for another. The identification of a period called the Middle Age (in France and Italy) and the Middle Ages in English-speaking countries works well for those countries which were once part of the Western Roman Empire, or played a significant part in its downfall, but not so well for those which formed part of the Eastern Roman Empire, and not at all for America, China, or for that matter Russia; but, given this limitation, it seems to have stood the test of time, whereas other ideas about the march of History have failed to catch on. For example, the idea, proposed by the *Annales* School in the 1950s and '60s, that we should only interest ourselves in the 'long duration', was only briefly fashionable. Despite Sir John Plumb's advice to the undergraduate Simon Schama (as related in *The Death of the Past*, 1969) few people are really inspired to read Redcliffe Salaman's *History of the Potato* or that matter Braudel's history of the Mediterranean. Plumb himself thought that the grand overarching interpretations of history— which involved a disregard for the conventional periods

of study – had all themselves passed into history: from the Christian interpretation to the Whig; from Progress to Social Darwinism; and from Manifest Destiny to dialectical materialism,

Conventionally, the Middle Ages is in the 'middle', because it was thought that the period between say 500 AD and say 1500 AD was a time when mankind suffered a significant reverse, from which it only recovered when the ancient Roman civilisation was re-born, by virtue of the 'Renaissance'. The Middle Ages is also usually divided into three sub-periods, Early or 'Dark Age(s)', 'High' and 'Late' or 'Later'.

## The Dark Age(s)

The Italian poet Petrarch (1304 – 1374) first characterised the post-Roman centuries as a 'dark' age, because of the poor quality of what little Latin literature they had to offer. Later historians, reflecting on demographic decline, the limited building activity undertaken and miserable living conditions which prevailed, regarded the entire period between 500 and 1500 as backward and superstitious. Modern scholars tend to reserve the adjective 'Dark Age(s)' for the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. following the barbarian invasions, when there is a scarcity both of chronicles and archives. In the case of England there was an almost complete absence of written sources, between the arrival of the first invaders around 450 A.D. and Bede's (672/673 – 735) *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*. Attempts, by Terry Jones and others, to rehabilitate the barbarians do not explain the cultural catastrophe.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the very idea of a Dark Age came under attack. In *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937) the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne proposed that Roman civilization had not been destroyed by the barbarian invasions of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, but by the Muslim expansion in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. That thesis was widely rejected; but Peter Brown's gained wide acceptance. In *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) and *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1976) Brown argued that there had been an explosion of new learning and spirituality in the Late Roman period, which lasted for several centuries. The advent of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was not to be deplored, as it had been in Edward Gibbon's *Decline & Fall* (1776-89), but welcomed. The so-called barbarian invasions 'were not perpetual, destructive raids, still less organised campaigns of conquest', merely a failure to properly absorb a 'gold-rush of immigrants'. Accordingly, the Western Roman Empire did not really fall, it underwent a mostly benign transformation. Startling as the thesis was, Brown's work led to a whole new school of thought, which re-named the period from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries as 'Late Antiquity'.

'Late Antiquity' is an idea which works better for the Eastern half of the Roman Empire than for the West, since the former had a renaissance of its own in

the 6<sup>th</sup> century and did not fall until 1453; but the very idea of Late Antiquity would have been lost on Sir Kenneth Clarke (1903 – 1983). Episode 1 of his TV series *Civilisation* (first shown in 1969), was entitled *The Skin of Our Teeth*, indicating that in Clarke's view civilised society barely managed to survive a truly dreadful time. This represents a continuing popular view and whilst the idea of Late Antiquity has been accepted in academic circles, there has been something of a reaction in the last decade. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (2005) Peter Heather re-tells the traditional story that the Empire did indeed fall, at least in the West, while arguing (unlike Gibbon) that the fall was not preceded by any marked internal decline.

The archaeology – at least in Italy and other parts of the West – supports Heather's view, and contradicts Brown's. In Bryan Ward-Perkins's *Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (2005), he tells of excavating layers of ash where fine Roman towns once stood and provides detailed evidence of the population decline and miserable living conditions referred to earlier. In his view, 'the coming of the Germanic peoples was very unpleasant for the Roman population, and the long-term effects of the dissolution of the empire were dramatic.'

The Frankish king Charlemagne (in Germany *Karl der Grosse*) attempted to recreate the Roman Empire in North-West Europe: he was crowned 'Holy Roman Emperor' in 800 AD; but his empire, and much else, was destroyed by a second wave of 'barbarian' invasions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Vikings, Magyars and Saracens ravaged all Europe. These peoples had very little in common: the Magyars rode in from the Steppes, while the other two came by ship; the Saracens were Muslims (and therefore not 'barbarian' at all), the other two pagan; but they were all regarded as enemies of Christianity, and whatever passed for a settled way of life. Some have questioned whether the Vikings were truly barbaric. In the 1960s and '70s Magnus Magnusson (1929-2007) popularised the idea that the Vikings were more interested in trade than rape and pillage. The archaeological findings in York in the late 1970s seemed to confirm his view; but one wonders what King Alfred and St Dunstan – who had the unenviable task of rescuing something from the ruins - would have thought of that idea.

## The High Middle Ages

It might be logical to present the years before and after 1000 AD as 'The Central Middle Ages'; but history is not written by logicians. Instead, the period in question was termed *Das Hochmittelalter* (the High Middle Ages), because the leading historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (when History became scientific) were German; and because there were many influential figures in the Second Reich (or German Empire of 1871-1918) who admired the First Reich or 'Holy Roman Empire of the German nation'. That Empire claimed universal jurisdiction, and consisted of Germany, the

Low Countries, Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia and large parts of Italy and Eastern France. The beginning of the period was placed either in 919 (when Henry the Fowler became King of the Germans), or 955 when Otto the Great defeated the Hungarians at the Battle of the Lechfeld, or 962 when he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor. The Holy Roman Empire was even admired, in the time of the Weimar Republic by Ernst Kantorowicz (1985-1963), author of a best-selling biography of Frederick II, a work which was also popular during Hitler's brief but terrible Third Reich.

The Germans are not the only ones who are in a sense proud of the achievements of the 'High Middle Ages'. In 1927 Charles Homer Haskins described a 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance. In *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991) Norman E. Cantor wrote that from 900 'civilisation began to move forward' again, partly because a new kind of heavy, wheeled plough had been invented around 800, agriculture had improved and the population had begun to grow; but he also thought that it was the First Crusade of 1095-99, which was led by the French, which 'inaugurated' the era. We should remember that most of France and the whole of Britain not only lay outside the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Empire; and that – unlike Germany - France and England saw the early formation nation states. French and English historians have tended to concentrate on the growth of centralised royal government, and the growth of royally-administered justice, first in England in Norman times, and then in France by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953) the Oxford historian R. W. Southern (who spent some years fighting the Third Reich) described a Europe where, during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular, Roman Catholic civilisation expanded, not just in Germany, the Baltic and Eastern Europe but in Spain, Sicily, the Holy Land, the Byzantine Empire and Scandinavia. It was also the age of 'high farming'; the period when the Papacy was shaped and transformed by Gregory VII and Innocent III; when monasticism was rejuvenated by St Bernard and the two main orders of Friars were founded by St Francis and St Dominic; when St Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologica*; when there was a Renaissance in learning; and even an alteration in the focus of Christianity (from God alone, to Christ as man and St Mary as mother); and when institutions were founded which lasted for centuries – feudalism, chivalry, the Universities, even Parliament.

Cantor wrote that Southern's *Making* painted a picture of the Middle Ages which was too rosy. It was not a picture that was recognisable by Protestant historians like H.C.Lea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or by contemporary Muslims or Jews. The High Middle Ages was not the age of the Crusade (which often resulted in violence against Jews as well as Arabs and Turks), it was also the period when the Inquisition was first founded. Southern himself did not think that everything had gone well, everywhere, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He thought that German leadership of Europe had 'misfired'- referring in particular to the fact that the Germans had put most of their energies into the narrowly focussed Northern Crusades in Prussia and Lithuania, rather than playing a leading role in the first three Crusades, which were

directed at the Holy Land; and he also pointed to the disastrous but long running conflict between Empire and Papacy.

When did the High Middle Ages end? In the German formulation, the *Hochmittelalter* included the reigns of the three Ottos, Frederick I ('Barbarossa', 1152-90) and Frederick II ('*Stupor Mundi*', 1220-50); but they also included the struggle for supremacy between the Papacy and the Emperors of the Hohenstaufen dynasty. A common date for the end of the High Middle Ages is therefore 1273, when Rudolf of Hapsburg assumed control of the Empire. The Hapsburgs continued to be immensely powerful, but their interests lay in Austria, while Italy had effectively been lost to local regimes, or else (in the South) to the Angevins. Meanwhile, Western Europe as a whole had run up against substantial barriers to further expansion. The period of agricultural expansion had reached a peak; the Mongols had arrived from the East; militant Islam had revived in Egypt and in Turkey; and the Crusades to the Holy Land had largely run their course as a respectable occupation for Christian knights. All the religious orders – monks, nuns and friars – saw a decrease in the number of recruits and vocations, as well as in the respect with which they were held in society.

## The Late Middle Ages

In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Holy Roman Empire turned inwards, though the Emperors still claimed sovereignty in Italy from time to time. The power and the prestige of the Papacy were also diminished, at first by the residence of successive Popes in Avignon between 1309 and 1377 and then by the scandal of the Great Schism of 1378-1417, when two popes vied for the loyalty of Western Christendom. Even when the Schism was healed, the unity of the Church was still torn asunder by heresy, widespread in England and Bohemia. Apart from the expedition which ended in disaster at Nicopolis in 1396, other crusades were used against fellow Christians, for political purposes. Between 1337 and 1453 England and France poured all their energies into the so-called Hundred Years' War, initially fought for dynastic purposes and ultimately for the cause of nationalism.

In 1348, the Black Death arrived, and over time wiped out between one half and one third of the population which did not recover for over a hundred years, though the economic and cultural effects of this are disputed. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (translated into English in 1924) the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga wrote of his chosen period as one of decline, cultural exhaustion and pessimism. His book was mainly concerned with art and in particular the art of the Burgundian Netherlands; but Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror, The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (1978) paints much the same picture, for the whole of her chosen century, and for the entire Continent of Europe.

Yet not all historians agree. Cantor wrote that the progress which had been made in the High Middle Ages as something which has 'never been fundamentally

reversed or halted'. In *Power and Profit, the Merchant in Medieval Europe* (2002), Peter Spufford described significant advances in banking, marine insurance and commerce in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and in his view, once these innovations had taken place, there was no going back. The Low Countries, now under Burgundian control, saw a flourishing market in art and the development of new forms of orthodox worship known as the *Devotio Moderna*. German cities thrived, despite (perhaps, because of?) the lack of central control. Italy witnessed a continuation of internecine strife, this time fuelled by imports of large numbers of foreign mercenaries, but also experienced the Renaissance in the humanities and in the fine arts, something which would not have been possible without a large network of wealthy patrons, both lay and ecclesiastic. Spain saw the final stage of the Christian *Reconquista*, the conquest of Muslim Granada, in 1492.

In England, there was a time when the Late Middle Ages was seen as particularly backward; but K.B.McFarlane (1903–1966) wrote about a country where the nobility was for the first time composed of educated men rather than country boors, where feudalism was transformed rather than 'bastardised' by the use of money-fiefs, and where men and institutions changed and adapted, rather than declined. His pupils continued this work and a radical revision of the Late Middle Ages resulted. In numerous works about English history in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries Maurice Keen (1933-2012) found much to be positive about: wages increased, despite counter-inflation legislation; serfdom disappeared as manorial labour services were converted into money rents; increasing numbers of laymen become literate; there was growth in the number of learned bishops; lay fraternities flourished; innumerable new chantries and colleges were founded; Perpendicular architecture proliferated in numerous parish churches, cathedrals and abbeys; and English emerged as a language of both government and literature. In *The Laws of War* (1965) and *Chivalry* (1984) Keen also traced how an international code of law and behaviour for soldiers, if not for non-combatants, had arisen in Western Europe and continued to be important throughout the Later Middle Ages.

## Modernity

Can we say with confidence when the modern age arrived? Some historians have thought that the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked a new era, in terms of philosophy and science as well as religion. Others, like Christopher Hill (1912-2003) thought a more important shift in knowledge and understanding took place during the so-called 'Century of Revolution' between 1603 and 1714. Others again, like Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914-2003) and Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) date the shift to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment).

So far as England was concerned, the answer at one time seemed clear: the Middle Ages ended in 1485 when Richard III (a quintessentially 'medieval' figure in

most people's minds) was killed and when Henry VII founded a 'new monarchy'. However, as long ago as 1874, in his best-selling *Short History of the English People* J. R. Green proposed that the new monarchy had been founded by Richard's predecessor and brother Edward IV (1461-1483). Subsequently, in *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (1953) Geoffrey Elton made his name by arguing that it was Thomas Cromwell who transformed England into a modern state. C.S.L. Davies described the most important changes very well in *Peace, Print and Protestantism 1450-1558* (1976), whose title encapsulates the argument.

The Tudor scene was Anglocentric. The Renaissance, fuelled by the printing revolution, was not - there is no doubt that it was the Italians who first used the term *Rinascita*, to define the emergence of the modern period out of the medieval, and that it was an Italian phenomenon, though scholars have since identified renaissances in both the Carolingian period and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance which preceded it. In *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955), Hans Baron (1900-88) argued that the turning point in the field of letters was the Chancellorship in Florence of the leading humanist Leonardo Bruni in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Giorgio Vasari (1511-74) identified a *Rinascita* in the fine arts in the previous century; for Machiavelli, who can best be described as a political scientist, the moment of change came in 1492, when Lorenzo the Magnificent died. For Guiccardini it was 1494, when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy. Contrast Giordano Bruno Guerri who, in *Antistoria degli Italiani* (1997) proposed that the period of the 'Spanish Domination' between 1500 and 1700 was Italy's true Middle Ages, both culturally and politically.

In *The Medieval World Complete* (2010) Robert Bartlett points out that, while the Italians focussed on cultural changes, others have focussed on the Turkish capture of Constantinople (1453), while the French have often chosen 1494 (the start of their Italian Wars) and the Germans look back variously on 1450 (Gutenberg's printing press); 1517 (Luther's Ninety-Five Theses); and 1525 (the German Peasants' War).

There is good reason to think that the Spaniards choice of 1492 was a good one when the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella oversaw both the *Reconquista* and their protégé, Christopher Columbus, discover America. The maps in Colin McEvedy's *Penguin Atlas of North American History* (1988), *The Times History of the World* (1999) and Jeremy Brotton's *History of the World in Twelve Maps* (2013) show vividly how this discovery 'broke the mould'. There was once a world of divided regions. Since 1492, there has been one world and it is visibly the modern one.

The rapid conquests of the Aztec and Inca Empires, made by the Spaniards in Central and South America in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, led to a price revolution in Europe; and the wider 'Columbian Exchange' - of animals, plants, human populations and culture was also fundamental; but these phenomena took time to develop. What was more rapid was the intellectual revolution which Columbus's discoveries entailed. The voyages sponsored by Portugal's Henry the Navigator (1394-1460) opened the way to the East; but that did not change men's world-view,

which was still the same as Marco Polo's (1254-1324). Columbus also looked for a new route to China, but what he actually found was a New World. The consequences for the way men thought were profound. It was not just that Science – geography, navigation and mapmaking - all took giant strides. What really mattered was the realisation – as Guiccardini noted – that the knowledge accumulated by the Greeks and Romans in Ancient times had now been surpassed.

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