
The Worlds of Medieval Europe

Clifford R. Backman

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**This book is for Scott Austin Backman,
who knows all the things that matter most.**



“Counseille me, Kynde,” quod I, “What craft be best to lerne?”

“Lerne to love,” quod Kynde, “and leef alle othere.”

[William Langland, *Piers Plowman* 20.206–207]

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Eliza McClennen drew the maps that appear throughout the book and has my thanks for her good cheer and speedy pen. Working with her again after too long a hiatus was one of the many pleasures I had in writing the book. Several of my students at Boston University—especially Letta Christianson, Andrew Donnelly, Ali Glass, and Chris Halfond—helped select the maps and photo illustrations and suggested source quotations that they had found most enlightening in the classroom. They will all have been graduated by the time this book appears in print. I shall miss seeing them around the office.

Each chapter has a *Suggested Reading* list appended to it. I have tried to make the lists as up to date as possible and to avoid repetition between them. Each list recommends pertinent “Texts” (primary sources, usually historical or literary, that were written in the period that each chapter discusses and that illustrate many of its chief themes), “Source Anthologies” (collections of primary materials, usually in abbreviated form and organized around a central topic), and “Studies” (works

of recent scholarship on ideas, events, or people mentioned in the chapter). The lists make no claim to be comprehensive; I hope they are merely a useful beginning to further research. I have tried to limit the lists only to books that are still in print, hence many well-known classics of medieval scholarship are omitted. In the case of reprints, I have given the publication dates of the most recent editions.

On the matter of dates, I should say that I have chosen to run counter to the growing trend among historians to use the Common Era. I endorse the use of the Common Era in general, since it has the attraction of religious non-partisanship in a religiously heterogeneous society, but at least one aspect of the present book is the formation of the older tradition itself: how and why western Europe developed the sort of society that chose the birth of Jesus as its chronometrical focal point. Thus I use the traditional B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini) designations. My aim throughout, however, is not to endorse a bias but to supply the context that gave birth to it.

Passages from the Hebrew Bible are quoted from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Jewish Publication Society, 1985); passages from the New Testament are quoted from *The New Jerusalem Bible* (revised edition, 1985); and passages from the Qur'an are quoted from *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings, with Commentary* (King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1410 A.H.). I have borrowed one translation, in Chapter 15, from *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, edited by Emilie Amt (1993). All other translations in this book are my own.



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INTRODUCTION



Why the Middle Ages Matter

Anyone who has ever laughed her way through *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, felt her soul stir when standing in one of Europe's great cathedrals, grown excited when reading about the chivalric exploits of mail-clad knights, or thrilled to the sounds of Gregorian chant knows that the Middle Ages are fun. There is no harm in admitting it. Signs of the pleasure we take in medieval life abound in our culture, from the mock sword fights of our childhood to the prominence of medieval settings in our popular literature and movies, from the crowds that flock annually to costumed medieval fairs to the groups of college students who enroll in classes on Chaucer and Dante. Part of our enjoyment derives from the perceived strangeness of medieval life. Until we become more familiar with them, medieval people strike us as rather odd: We marvel at their actions or laugh at their absurdities because they seem more unlike us than any other of our ancestors do. After all, as is well known, people in medieval Europe believed in miracles and witches. They long thought the surest way to determine whether or not a man was guilty of a crime was to tie him up and throw him into a lake that been blessed by a priest.¹ They were convinced that daily bathing was harmful to one's health; that magical incantations could transform common metals into gold; that a reliable method of contraception was for the woman, during intercourse, to wear a necklace of strung weasel-testicles; that one could rid oneself of toothache by spitting into the opened mouth of a frog; and that the appearance of comets usually signified some kind of heavenly favor or disfavor for whatever was happening in the realm at the time.

But the Middle Ages have a real significance far greater than their entertainment value, and so long as we merely revel in the fun of their uniqueness we will never fully understand our medieval ancestors or learn what they have to teach us. The starting assumption of this book, therefore, is that the Middle Ages really do matter and that studying them is important. The simplest reason for this assertion is that despite initial appearances the medieval world and the modern world have many things in common, and by understanding the origins of contemporary phenomena we gain if not a truer than at least a more sophisticated appreciation of them. How is this so? We can trace a surprising number of modern ideas, technologies, institutions, and cultural practices back to the medieval centuries—by which we mean the period roughly from 400 to 1400. Parliamentary government, banks, algebra, mechanical clocks, trials by jury, women playwrights, polyphonic music, universities, paper mills, citizen armies, distilled liquor, medical dissection, the novel, law schools, eyeglasses, the modern calendar, insurance

1. If the "pure" water "accepted" the man—that is, if he drowned—he was proved innocent.

companies, navigational maps, bookstores, the mafia, and even an early version of the game of baseball all appeared for the first time in western history in the Middle Ages. Modern ideas about the nature of citizenship and the authority of the State, about law and romance, about the need to control the manufacture and distribution of weaponry, also first materialized in these centuries. Even something as modern, if not postmodern, as the literary theory of deconstruction has roots in the medieval philosophers' debates over Realism and Nominalism, although those roots stretch back even further to the time of Plato.

Recognizing the medieval/modern connection illumines and enriches our understanding of the world around us. Why the tradition of college campuses having their own autonomous police forces? Because universities, when they came into existence at the very end of the twelfth century, were designed as self-governing institutions legally independent of the urban communities that housed them. This tradition is also the origin of the famous "town/gown" tensions that have always characterized urban universities: Students on boisterous weekend exploits might damage urban property, but they stood outside the jurisdiction of the urban police. Why do priests raise the offering of the Mass above their heads when they celebrate Communion? Because the medieval Church taught that the faithful had only to see the bread and wine, not partake of them, in order to receive the spiritual benefit of the Mass. Needless to say, this practice also reduced the Church's expenditures on those commodities. How did the popular custom of decorating eggs and awaiting pleasant bunnies at Easter begin? Peasants on medieval manors owed a special tax to their lords every Easter Sunday, which, lacking money, they paid with what they had available.² Why do we purchase tourist trinkets when we travel—such as Eiffel Tower key chains to prove we've been to Paris, or beer steins to commemorate our trips to Munich? Because medieval pilgrims often undertook their voyages as an imposed penance for their sins and had to provide proof of their successful journeys in order to receive pardon; bringing back a trademark local ware was the easiest way of proving that one had in fact reached one's assigned destination. Knowing such things adds a rich texture to our lives that we should not deprive ourselves of.

While these points are significant by themselves, medieval history has an even larger importance for modern students. Medieval civilization was an alloy, the product of the amalgamation of three distinct cultures: classical Rome, Latin Christianity, and early Germanic society. It was a civilization that, for all its ethnic, social, and political plurality, regarded itself as an organic whole. The medieval worldview regarded life as an essential unity—that is, it believed that there existed a super-arching unifying structure, divinely and naturally ordained, that held together and gave meaning to the obvious pluralism and diversity of everyday existence. This unifying vision is the most distinctive characteristic of the medieval mentality. Whether in terms of its intellectual and artistic life, with their emphases on the systematizing of knowledge and the integration of motifs, genres, and styles into larger constructs; or in terms of its political and social life, with their emphases on state-building and the interdependence of each segment of society in prescribed roles; or in terms of its ethnic, sexual, and religious relations, with their attempts to regulate the roles of each group and the rules of their interaction—the principal thrust of medieval civilization was to connect what was disparate and to find stability in the multifarious unity that resulted. John of Salisbury, an important

2. That's right: The Easter bunny was eaten by the nobles.

political theorist of the twelfth century, provided an illustration of this belief in organic wholeness when he likened a political state to the human body:

Those who guide religious life [in any given commonwealth] should be respected and honored as the body's soul. . . . The role of the body's head is played by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who represent Him on earth and carry out His sacred office, just as in a human body the head is both animated and governed by the soul. The place of the heart is filled by the central court, from which all actions, whether good or bad, originate. Judges and local administrators represent the eyes, ears, and tongue; and their civil servants and military men correspond to the hands. . . . Tax officials and accountants correspond to the stomach and the intestines. . . . Peasants identify with the body's feet, since they work upon the soil . . . and propel the weight of the entire body forward.

Such a mentality categorized individuals and established legal and social hierarchies, but the essential cast of this mind was to unite, not to atomize, the distinct elements of society. It assigned a role for every individual but always integrated those individuals into the larger social body.

This concern to find and define a collective cultural identity greater than individual traits of ethnicity, social class, political tradition, and gender is the medieval world's most lasting legacy; and in light of our contemporary concerns about social diversity and cultural pluralism—what we often describe as our regard for multiculturalism—the medieval struggle to establish a meaningful, ordered sense of heterogeneity within unity takes on a particular relevance, not as a prescription for how to resolve contemporary issues about individual or group identity but as an illuminating example of how questions that confront us were dealt with in the past. Just as in any other aspect of our public and private lives, it helps to know that other people have confronted similar problems, and we can learn valuable lessons from their successes and failures.

This book will emphasize the ways in which medieval people sought to recognize heterogeneity and difference while seeking to create a meaningful unity out of it, and this emphasis sets us apart from more traditional ways of writing medieval history. With regard to politics, we will pay less attention to the specific details of individual rulers than do other books, and will emphasize instead how the varying political traditions of medieval Europe (generally rural-monarchical in northern Europe, and urban-communal in the Mediterranean lands) emerged as responses evolving from different local needs yet aiming at the same goal of creating a stable ordering of Christian society. We will discuss how techniques of food production in rural areas, or the regulated ethnic demography of urban centers (that is, allowing Jews to live in this quarter of the city, Muslims in that quarter, Venetians over here, Barcelonans over there, etc.) exemplified efforts to modulate social organization and identity. We will examine phenomena such as scholasticism and cathedral building as models of how thinkers, architects, and artists sought to meld vast all-encompassing superstructures of diverse ideas, styles, and techniques into harmonious wholes. And on the darker side, we will consider how the medieval mania for identifying lepers, heretics, Jews, homosexuals, witches, criminals, and other general "evil-doers" characterized both a desire to stamp them out at times, and, at other times, to define their proper (if decidedly inferior) place in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Medieval Europe emerged slowly from the rubble of the fallen Roman Empire and struggled through several centuries of warfare, poverty, and disease before

achieving a tentative, fragile stability under the Carolingian rulers of the eighth and ninth centuries. After the Carolingians, a second period of disarray descended, until at some point in the eleventh century Europe quite literally rebuilt itself—physically, politically, spiritually, economically, and socially—and entered a period of impressive expansion, wealth, stability, and intellectual and artistic revival. Many of those gains were lost, as we shall see, in the calamities of the fourteenth century; but by that point the foundations were securely laid for Europe to move into the Renaissance with both the technological and economic means, and the ideological convictions, that would prepare Europe to dominate the globe. The long centuries of the Middle Ages saw western Europe transform itself from a sparsely populated, impoverished, technologically primitive, socially chaotic, and often barbaric place to the world's wealthiest, best educated, most technologically developed, and most powerful civilization to date. As we shall see, much of that transformation depended precisely on the ways in which the many worlds of the Middle Ages tried to fashion the connections and conflicts of everyday life into a unified vision of human existence.

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES



The Third through Ninth Centuries

	PART ONE	
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THE ROMAN WORLD AT ITS HEIGHT

The Roman Empire of the first and second centuries A.D. comprised the largest, wealthiest, most diverse, and most stable society of the ancient world. No other ancient empire—not the Assyrian, not the Persian, not the Athenian—had succeeded on such a scale at holding together in harmony so many peoples, faiths, and traditions. Historians commonly describe these two centuries as the period of the *Pax Romana* (“the Roman Peace”), an age when a strong central government engineered and maintained the social stability that allowed people to prosper. The sheer vastness of the empire was astonishing: It stretched over three thousand miles from west to east, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and reached northward to Hadrian’s Wall, a fortification built in A.D. 122 to protect Roman Britain from the Picts of Scotland, and southward to the upper edge of the Sahara. Within this vast territory lived as many as fifty to sixty million people.

The prosperity of those centuries came at a high cost. Rome’s rise to power was the result of military might, after all, and long centuries of warfare had preceded “the Roman peace.” In the bloody Punic Wars of the third century B.C. Rome defeated Carthage, its main rival for control of the western and central Mediterranean, before turning its eyes aggressively eastward and subduing the weakened Greek states left over from the collapse of Alexander the Great’s empire. But soon after it had conquered the known world, the Roman state went to war against itself: Civil wars raged for well over a century as various factions struggled not only to control the new superstate but to reshape it according to opposing principles. Some factions favored preserving the decentralized administrative practices of the early Republic, while others, such as the faction led by Julius Caesar, championed a strong centralized authority; some favored a rigid aristocratic authoritarianism, while others promoted a more radically democratic society. These long wars ended in a bizarre compromise. The empire of the Pax Romana period was a thoroughly centralized state that delegated most of its day-to-day authority to local officials; and it was a decidedly hierarchical society, almost obsessive in its concern to define every individual’s social and legal classification; and yet it remained a remarkably fluid world in which a family could rise from slavery to aristocratic status in as few as three generations.

Two factors did the most to shape the Roman world and foster its remarkable vitality and stability: the Mediterranean Sea and the Roman army.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF EMPIRE

The Roman world, like the medieval world that succeeded it, was centered on the Mediterranean. The sea provided food, of course, but more importantly it

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