

Middle Ages

People living in the period we call the Middle Ages did not think of themselves as ‘medieval’. The concept was arose among Italian humanists who sought to recover the literary culture of the Ancient World, which they believed had been lost in the centuries in between. But in those centuries there was little awareness that there had been a break with what we call the Ancient World. Holy Roman emperors added their laws to the Justinianic Corpus without any sense of discontinuity or incongruity. Nor, obviously, could they foresee the reaction of Italian humanists against their own intellectual culture and academic syllabus.

We need not take the Humanists belief that they marked the start of a new age too seriously. For the most part, Humanism did not mean much more than more a more Classical style of Latin (and, later, knowledge of Greek); also a new syllabus that, grosso modo, survives to this day in the *Liceo Classico*. (Until into the twentieth century it was the core syllabus everywhere.) Italian Humanism and the ‘Renaissance’ did not however mark a new world view. Most humanists were pious Christians, and they tended to take their political world views from their employers. Thus we should not accept their periodisation uncritically. It is true that the ‘Ancient – Medieval – Modern’ schema has become a standard template for History teaching and even the classification of scholars. Even that should does not exempt the concept of ‘Medioevo’ from critical reflection. Syllabus categories are a matter of pragmatic convenience and should not be treated too reverently. There are indeed some serious arguments against the Ancient-Medieval-Modern schema.

Firstly, there are great continuities linking the ‘Ancient’ and ‘Medieval’ worlds – especially where the history of the Catholic Church is concerned. The empire in the West was still going strong when Siricius issued the first surviving recognizable papal decretal. The episcopal structure that would remain the backbone of Church organisation was already in place. Most of the works of ‘Patristic’ theology that would nourish reflection throughout the centuries after the break up of the empire in the West were written before it happened, or before most people realised it was permanent. These works, above all those of Augustine of Hippo, continued to be studied intensely by humanists and indeed by Protestant scholars.

For, secondly, great continuities also link the ‘medieval’ centuries with the ‘modern’ period. Some of these continuities run right through from the Ancient World, mainstream Protestantism inherited not only Patristic theology but also the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas formulated by councils under the late Roman Empire and in the early ‘Middle Ages. As for Counter-Reformation Catholicism, many of its devotions and some of the dogmas that differentiated it from Protestantism go back to the later medieval centuries. The list of seven sacraments, the doctrine of Transubstantiation, a clear doctrine of Purgatory, belief that those purified in Purgatory and the saints enjoyed the Beatific Vision even before the end of the World, indulgences, regular confession, devotion to the Immaculate Conception, Scholastic theology – the list could go on. The plethora of centralised religious orders linked closely to the papacy was the continuation of a trend that really took off with the thirteenth century friars, though one could date its beginning to a still earlier period and the Cluniac version of the Benedictine life.

This in turn reminds us, thirdly, of the transformations that took place within the period characterised as ‘medieval’. The religious patterns just listed all developed fairly rapidly in the century or so after the Gregorian Reform of the eleventh century. They had deep roots, but came to maturity fairly late. The same is true of social, cultural, and political history. From the eleventh to the thirteenth century we see the agricultural expansion of peasants and knights from ‘old Europe’ into East central Europe, a rapid growth of towns and trade which transformed the whole economy, the birth of universities, vernacular literature, and some quite modern-looking states. The classic study of *The Making of the Middle Ages* by Sir Richard Southern deals not with late Antiquity but with the eleventh and twelfth century – a reminder of the subjectivity of period terminology. There is indeed much to be said for regarding 1100 and the decades on either side as a kind of watershed in medieval history.

This was not however the first transformation within the ‘Middle Ages’. The Carolingian era saw the Islamic invasions, a shift in the religious centre of gravity towards the North, the creation of the Holy Roman Empire, a new script that swept Europe, and a cultural renovation arguably as important as the Italian Renaissance.

The concept of a ‘Medioevo’ becomes particularly meaningless when extended to areas outside Western Christendom. The history of the West is in this period only incidentally connected with that of, say, India or China. Any similarities between Europe and an Asian country in, say the thirteenth century are purely coincidental. Even the history of the Islamic lands cannot usefully be forced into a European periodisation.

All this warns us not to take periodisation too seriously. In the nineteenth century and into the twentieth it was widely believed that ‘ages’ had ‘identities’, so that all the aspects of an age – art, literature, law and so on – had in some sense a common centre. This rather mystical theory undoubtedly produced some excellent History, perhaps because it forced historians to break down compartments between different spheres of life. J. Huizinga’s *Autumn of the Middle Ages* was held together by the idea that Burgundian culture in the fourteenth and fifteenth century represented the decline of an age – almost as if an age had a lifecycle like a person – rather than the dawn of the new Renaissance *Zeitgeist*. Whether or not this Hegelian terminology was used, some sort of *Zeitgeist*-theory used to be prevalent, especially in cultural history. But this approach to history survives today only in Marxist theory (in a materialist form), with the ‘Slavery – Feudal – Capitalist’ schema of history. Modern historians realise the heterogeneity of the many things that happen within a common time frame. No doubt everything influences everything, but the network of influences extends just as much to the past and future and there is no ‘centre’ of a period, no *Zeitgeist*.

Even so, and even after exorcising *Zeitgeister*, historians continue to need to talk about periods, including ‘the Middle Ages’. They need these concepts as ideal-types, that is, as simplified schemas without which it is impossible to get any kind of grip on the multifarious and incredibly complicated network of data we possess about the past. We need to divide it up for practical purposes: examination syllabi, job descriptions, and division of labour among scholars. If we do not expect too much insight from them, and remain aware of their limitations, there is nothing wrong with concepts like ‘Medioevo’.

We do best to define them simply, *grosso modo*. We may discount the claims of Italian humanists to have inaugurated a whole new age, but the Reformation has a better claim. It truly transformed the European scene, including Catholic Europe. The style of Catholicism changed in some important respects. There was drastic reform and a new seriousness. Whereas all Henry VIII of England's bishops but one had accepted his settlement, the Catholic episcopate whom Elizabeth found were made of much sterner stuff. Catholic apologetics became orientated towards the refutation of Protestantism. Religious life in the Protestant lands was obviously very different, though less so in Lutheran than in Calvinist territories.

As for the beginning of the 'Medioevo', it is most simply defined as the break-up of the Roman Empire in the West. Even that is not a simple fact, for Justinian temporarily recovered Italy. Nonetheless one may say for practical purposes that at the end of the fifth century in the West the empire had been irrevocably replaced North of the Alps by successor states. Thus for practical purposes the 'Medioevo' can be defined as: from the Fall of Rome to the Reformation, circa 500 to circa 1500. For the purpose of textbooks, publishers' catalogues and university departmental structure, that is good enough.

Can one go further with the concept of the 'Medioevo' and use it to uncover any less extrinsic features of European religious history? Perhaps yes, and in at least two respects. Firstly, the 'Middle Ages' in which Latin was a self-confidently living language of learning and religion – but not of the uneducated. The fact that the uneducated could not understand it marks the period off from the Ancient World. The fact that it was self-confidently a living language marks it off from the early modern period, when Classical Latin literature had become a linguistic yardstick. In the Middle Ages, the pressure to say things in the language of the Ancients, as opposed to inventing words when there was something new to label, can be called distinctive feature of the period. This should not be overstressed. Neo-Latin was also tremendously inventiv,. Nonetheless the unselfconscious creativity of medieval Latin as a cultural medium can be called a distinctive feature of the period.

Secondly, the acceptance all over Europe of papal law is a defining characteristic of the 'Middle Ages'. Around 500 papal decretals were being collected together with conciliar canons into legal compilations, of which the most important is probably that of Dionysius Exiguus. These decretals seem to have been gathered from episcopal archives. From the late fourth century bishops had begun to write to the pope for answers to tricky legal problems, and the answers had been kept and perhaps passed from diocese to diocese. There was no enforcement mechanism but presumably these compilations helped bishops decide cases. Charlemagne perhaps unwittingly propagated the importance of papal law by referring to papal rulings in his *Admonitio generalis* of 789. The Pseudo-Isidorian compilation produced by Paschasius Radbertus in the ninth century paid homage to papal authority by forging papal decretals and bringing them together with genuine ones. The eleventh century papal reformers produced compilations designed to reinforce their agenda. Reform legislation in the later eleventh and twelfth century generated new legal problems and there was a sharply rising trend to appeal to the pope to settle them. Often these test cases were recognized as setting precedents, and there were fresh compilations of papal decretals. Finally, in 1234, an

official collection was promulgated. In the previous half century and more a new class of professionally trained canon lawyers had begun to emerge, around the same time as an infrastructure of semi-bureaucratic local ecclesiastical courts. Thus papal law is far from a static fact of medieval history, but it is a theme running right through this period. Papal law governed all of Latin Europe and many aspects of life, above all the clergy's but also the validity of marriage. Thus one may define the Middle Ages as an ideal-type, defined undogmatically and for convenience as the period from c. 500 to c. 1500, from the Fall of Rome to Luther, with a self-confident Latin culture and a framework of papal law.

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (3rd edn., Oxford, 1997) s.v. 'Middle Ages, the'

J. Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, transl. R. J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch (Chicago, 1996)

R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1967)