
Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages

ABSTRACT Medieval history has become synonymous with the study of western Europe. This article argues that it is important to widen the geographic focus to better understand the Middle Ages as a whole, and in doing so, counter Eurocentric views of the past that have dominated and shaped views of the past. At a time of profound global change today, it is worth reflecting on how and why other regions and cultures have been pushed into the shadows, and why it is imperative to show them now in new light.

KEYWORDS: History, Medieval History, Middle Ages, Global Middle Ages, Western Europe, European Middle Ages

Time, wrote Anna Komnene in the mid-12th century, flies by irresistibly, sweeping up events as they take place and plunging them into darkness. There is only one defence against the great stream of time, she writes. The “science of history” checks the irresistible flood, preventing the past from disappearing for ever and stopping it from slipping away into the depths of oblivion.

These words, which appear in *The Alexiad*, one of the jewels of Byzantine literature, written in the imperial capital of Constantinople, serve as fitting inspiration for any historian wishing to reflect on the importance of looking at the past and on the purpose of history. To judge from the robust state of contemporary scholarship on the Middle Ages, a great deal of light is being shined on the events, peoples, and culture that took place, lived, and thrived in the period often broadly defined as spanning between 500-1500.

Student interest at college, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, remains consistently strong, and in some cases, is growing. Academic monographs, edited volumes, and journals are proliferating to the extent that it can sometimes feel difficult to keep up with the new work being published by authors—tenured professors, early career scholars, doctoral students, and independent scholars too—whose primary focus is on one or more aspects of medieval history. The annual International Medieval Conference held in Leeds, England each year attracts some 3,000 delegates, and provides one example that illustrates how the field is thriving; the parallel event in North America—the International Congress on Medieval Studies held annually at Kalamazoo, Michigan—provides another.

So too does the role that the Middle Ages plays in public imagination. There is a large and enthusiastic readership in the general public that reads books about medieval history with great interest, meaning that books about medieval history sell well and encourage publishers to take on works that not only give them visibility, but, perhaps just as

importantly, allow them to be more affordably priced than many university presses, where it is not uncommon for monographs about history (including the Middle Ages) to retail for \$150 or more. The appetite for medieval history beyond university campuses is also reflected in the fact that books in this field are often prominently reviewed in the national press, keeping individual topics and the subject in general in enviable shape.

As all medieval historians know, this can be a double-edged sword at times, with simplifications, misunderstandings, or appropriations of the term “medieval” and even of imagery and themes from the period being used and mis-used in the public arena. It is a rite of passage for medievalists to have to come to terms with how to best react when hearing commentators use the word “medieval” as a synonym for barbarism, brutality, and torture. This has taken a rather more serious turn in recent times by the widespread and growing interest by the alt-right movement in the symbols and assumed ideas about the Crusades in particular, which have become juxtaposed onto contemporary opinions about modern geopolitics and current affairs in the Middle East and, indeed, closer to home. While challenging and sometimes even upsetting, the fact that there is a large body of scholars with expertise who are able to provide context, nuance and also to correct flawed assumptions has clearly become important beyond the campus, moving into the arena of national debate about the use of the past in the present.

Why then is there a need for the *Journal of Medieval Worlds*? Why add to an already crowded field at a time when scholarship about the Middle Ages is flourishing, and there are more authors writing about the medieval period than at any time since the medieval period itself, if not many more? With so many scholars working on such diverse materials and in such different ways, how can there be scope to pull new strands together that is not already being done?

Historians can spend much time debating the thorny issue of periodisation. This is no less true in the case of the Middle Ages, where there is considerable debate about marking start or end points to a supposedly contiguous period, about the dangers of implying (if not assuming) that “start” or “end” points raise more problems than they solve. We are all familiar with the arguments, and also their importance. However, we spend rather less time thinking about the problems of regionalisation.

The history of the Middle Ages that we read about and work on is usually nothing of the sort. It is in fact the history of Europe, and primarily of western Europe that scholars work on. The innovative, brilliant, and important scholarship that has been produced in the last century (and continues to be produced today) is overwhelmingly focused on core areas of the continent of Europe—namely on what is now Italy, Germany, France, Britain, and Spain. When the geographic area of interest widens, it opens us to include areas that can be considered peripheral to judge from the relatively low level of coverage that they receive in mainstream studies of the Middle Ages, such as Scandinavia, North Africa, Kievan Rus’, and the Byzantine Empire.

There are, of course, exceptions to the narrowness of geographic focus, but it is an incontestable fact that the suffocating majority of attention falls on the same small part of the world. There are historic reasons for this of course, connected amongst other things to the location of universities that have led medieval studies, and in turn to the patronage,

tuition, and specialisms of the scholars who have worked there in past decades and even centuries. But this has had the inadvertent and unintended by-product of strengthening already well-investigated topics at the expense of a wider understanding of the past. We have divided history into geographic zones that have as little congruity and coherence as the way that we separate periods; in the opinion of this author, the effects are more damaging and much harder to overcome.

To give an example, while there are many wonderful academic journals in North America, the outstanding publication is *Speculum*, the quarterly publication of the Medieval Academy of America. The journal is “open to contributions in all fields studying the Middle Ages” between 500-1500. “The primary focus,” according to its submission guidelines, “is on Western Europe, but Arabic, Byzantine, Hebrew and Slavic Studies are also included.”

There are obvious and practical reasons to restrict the specialism of a journal, including the viability of a network of editors and peer reviewers who are able to judge the originality and quality of articles that are submitted for publication. Nevertheless, the purpose of the journal, explicitly articulated, is to focus on the history of Europe (and indeed one half of Europe), even if it adds that there are some related fields that may overlap.

The idea that “European” history, or even “western European” history is contiguous, distinct, or related is one that few medievalists would try to defend seriously. How one tries to make sense of drawing parallels between, say, Sicily, Switzerland, Wales, and Toledo in the 11th century makes the mind boggle, as would the exclusion of Budapest, Alexandria, or Tblisi. So, while the practicalities of specializing on and teaching the history of countries which use Latin as a primary written language have their own logic, from a wider perspective of trying to look at the medieval period, the limitations are not so much unfortunate as misleading and distorting.

Of the books about the Middle Ages reviewed by *Speculum* in 2018, just 2% were about subjects not related to Western Europe. Not a single article was published over the last five years that focused on the Byzantine Empire, Eastern Europe, or the world beyond the Mediterranean. The point, of course, is not to single out one journal—whose articles and reviews are of the very highest standard—but rather to underline the hugely problematic ways in which the past has been conceptualized.

Other journals and publications bear the same stamp. The *Journal of Medieval History*, another academic production of the very highest standards, restricts its view to “the history of Europe in the Middle Ages,” which means that there is a specific and explicit limit to the idea of what history means. While editors are (presumably) unlikely to turn down excellent papers about other regions, the fact that none have been published that take the perspective beyond the Caucasus or the Sahara as the absolute geographic extremities tells its own story at the very least of narrowness of the range of articles submitted for consideration.

In this context, it is perhaps no great surprise to note how the Eurocentric narrative has become so dominant as to shape mainstream views of the past. It is standard, for example, to find titles like *Medieval Christianity: A New History*, *The Medieval Church: A Short History*, or *The History of the Medieval Christianity 1050-1500*, which do not mention

the church in Asia, despite well attested ecclesiastical structures across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and China. In some cases, there is either a single reference to the Orthodox church in Constantinople and across the Byzantine and Slavic lands, or no reference at all. Christianity and its history have become western European concepts and constructs, with no context or coverage of regions that are fundamentally important as subjects in their own right, and surely essential to include in accounts that examine medieval Christianity or the medieval Christian Church.

This extends into many and various parallel examples. Books on *Medieval Military Technology* or on *Medieval Warfare* do not mention techniques being used even in the eastern part of the Mediterranean (other than by western knights and practitioners), let alone in the Seljuk, Song, Mongol, or Chola empires, to name a few. Texts on *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* only talk about philosophers writing in Europe and in Latin, giving no space to the great scholars like Ibn Sina, al-Kindi, and others, while supposedly comprehensive accounts of the *History of Medieval Political Thought, c.300-1450*, have a similarly narrow geographical focus that pre-supposes, at least implicitly, that the only ideas that matter emerged from Europe—and moreover, that they emerged in isolation, fortuitously, and independently of stimuli from elsewhere.

The Medieval World as presented by modern scholarship is one that is exclusively and aggressively centered on western Europe, to the exclusion by fault or design of other parts of the world. Even the magnificent *New Cambridge Medieval History* that covers the period c. 1198-1300 sets out this vision clearly. Apart from a single chapter on the Mongols, tellingly entitled “The Mongols and Europe,” no coverage is given to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central, South and South East Asia, China, Oceania, or the Americas.

There are of course many reasons for the way that the shape of the past has been carved. Key, surely, are the linguistic challenges in being able to investigate primary sources in multiple languages. What unites the concept of the medieval world—principally of western Europe and its frontier zones—is that much of the written material is conveniently written in Latin. This provides an apparent homogeneity in one way between different parts of what might superficially be described as a world with much in common; yet, as medievalists themselves know too well, it is the differences between peoples—vernacular languages, identities, aspirations, social structures—that are as notable and important as any notional similarities.

This might explain why historians of the Crusades have been so unwilling to engage with sources written in Constantinople, but also in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa in their accounts of the expeditions and interventions in the Holy Land from the end of the 11th century onwards. Understanding florid Byzantine Greek texts, accounts written in Armenian, or Syriac, is not always easy. But the fact that this may be the case has meant that scholars are not drifting to topics and regions that are most rewarding or even interesting, but to those of least resistance.

Looking further east, north, or south to lands where Old Church Slavonic, Semitic (Hebrew, Arabic, Ge'ez), Turkic, Iranian, Indic, and Sino-Tibetan were spoken and written, requires a linguistic training, determination, and strong constitution, because

engaging with material that is poorly studied or even ignored altogether is more challenging than working in a well-populated field where material is often well-known and subject to commentaries—often brilliant ones—and presents different challenges. It is not easier to say something original about popular topics; in fact, it is sometimes extremely difficult to do so, which means that, in many cases, work being produced on western Europe is innovative, pioneering, and extremely exciting—and better still, it opens new approaches to a highly-engaged field.

The *Journal of Medieval Worlds* is therefore designed to do three inter-locking and related things. The first aim is to encourage scholars to think and write about a world that does not begin and end with Europe. Doing so can help reclaim the “Middle Ages” in terms that allow and even force us to think about experiences, similar or otherwise, in other regions and continents and removes the Eurocentric straight-jacket of what scholars mean when they write about the medieval period. There are, of course, questions and problems about what exactly “the Middle Ages” mean from a South Asian or Chinese perspective, or from that of a pre-Columbian exchange in the case of the Americas. But re-centering the Middle Ages away from the narrowness of Europe seems important, not least during the current time of political change and upheaval.

Secondly, while the opening up of the geographic boundaries has a value in itself, the idea of inter-connected worlds where influences and borrowings are normal, where cultural, political, and economic exchange between empires, states, towns, and communities—sometimes across long-distances—is one with which few historians of any period would argue. Separating one country or region from others is arbitrary and myopic, as all realize; but clearly a great deal of work has to go in to exploring in more detail the rivalries, connections, and exchanges of all kinds that have encouraged an increasing number of scholars to talk about the “Global Middle Ages.”

This too is not straight-forward or easy, and one of the difficulties of “global history” is that it imposes a view that is equally restrictive as Eurocentrism. In this sense, the journal’s title of *Medieval Worlds* is carefully chosen to allow for fluidity in approach that enables exchanges, similarities, and differences to be explored across one, two, or more connected networks. There are of course some subject matters—notably disease and climate change—that offer scope for analysis and assessment that really can be inter-continental in scope and range. But there is no need to try exclusively to look at small-volume high-visibility long-distance exchange of elite goods to try to understand how ideas, beliefs, and rituals between neighboring locations influenced each other, or what the impact was of periods of increased (or diminished) economic activity.

It can only be helpful, too, that those studying the history of one part of the world (including western Europe, of course) are exposed in a scholarly journal to the latest research in others. This does not have to involve direct parallels that can be clumsy and superficial; but models of kingship in the Khmer world may—or may not—strike a chord with those studying similar topics in the Seljuk empire or in Norman Sicily; those working on the administration of justice in frontier-society Spain in the 1000s may see what questions are being asked, and what answers suggested, for Qarakaniid Central Asia in the same period. How agricultural production is assessed in the Chola empire may well spark new

ideas about the subject in Moche society in South America; or how the manufacture of metals in west Africa compares to those of the nomadic peoples across the steppes north of the Black and Caspian Seas.

The point is not to force vogueish and unconvincing analogies or false parallels for its own sake. But surely we should either demand more accurate terminologies and talk of the European Middle Ages, or even the Western European Middle Ages, or broaden the definition that few have suggested but which has taken over the subject in much the same way as Latin and Greek have subordinated “Classics” as a term, excluding Sanskrit, Chinese, and other written materials both implicitly and explicitly.

The *Journal of Medieval Worlds* is a step to try to correct the imbalance and to shift how we think about the past in ways that are more inclusive and provide space for the histories of those outside Europe and its immediate footprint to have their histories, their sciences, philosophies, and cultures investigated as well.

Such a move away from Eurocentrism is essential and a transition will take time to filter through the academy. In this sense, the fact that more and more faculties are starting to offer courses in global history will help accelerate the interests of students and researchers alike. In so doing, it will also help us understand the European model itself not only in a wider context, but in greater detail.

It is the duty of a historian, Fernand Braudel wrote, to be bold when it comes to writing about history. This new journal will help showcase new research across much wider regions than others. As a result, it is hoped that throwing light on to topics long outside the mainstream of medieval studies as the term is usually understood will save them from continuing to be swept away by darkness. In so doing, it will also help better inform those working on subjects and regions that can only benefit from learning about recent developments and new research. And it will furthermore help enlighten all medievalists, regardless of specialism, about the broader period and the wider world. I am delighted that this journal is being published and am excited about the role it will play not just for medieval historians, but for medieval history as a whole. ■