

Medieval Studies after the Global Turn

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There are several reasons readers might be surprised to see the domain of Medieval Studies discussed in this special issue: they may argue that this field focuses per se on the history of Europe and is thus by its very essence not open to “global” approaches; they may also point out that the medieval period belongs to a “pre-global” segment of history.¹ Nevertheless, global perspectives have become an important and fertile part of Medieval Studies in recent decades. In what follows, we present a selection of major contributions, discuss their effects on the way we write (medieval) history, and think about future perspectives. This short article does not seek to provide a representative overview of “global Medieval Studies,” but rather reflects on the current situation and some of its effects on European Medieval Studies.

The “global Middle Ages” has become a fairly well-established term used in a growing number of publications and new journals.² This development and its

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1. For a helpful discussion of different concepts (world history, universal history, global history) from a medievalist’s perspective, see Michael Borgolte, “Mittelalter in der größeren Welt. Eine europäische Kultur in der globalen Perspektive,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 295 (2012): 35–61, here pp. 35–43.

2. For instance, the *Medieval History Journal* (since 1998); the *Journal of Transcultural Studies* (since 2010); *Medieval Worlds* (since 2014); and the *Journal of Medieval Worlds* (since 2019). See also Jérôme Baschet, “Faut-il mondialiser l’histoire médiévale?” in *Histoire monde, jeux d’échelles et espaces connectés*, ed. Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public (Paris: Éd. de la Sorbonne, 2017), 13–36.

context differ from what can be observed in modern history, however. The impact of “globalization” on Medieval Studies seems to be more ambivalent (resulting in diverse reactions from medievalists), not least due to the specificities that characterize the premodern world and its cultures, which affect the construction of research subjects, methods, and approaches. While some parts of the scientific community eagerly embrace these new perspectives, others firmly resist global approaches. As Peter Frankopan noted in his programmatic contribution to the first issue of the *Journal of Medieval Worlds*: “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.”³

Whether this will change, and whether the label “Middle Ages” as well as the conventional periodization from circa 500 to circa 1500 will survive, remains to be seen. Currently, we are witnessing a fervent debate between advocates of global perspectives in Medieval Studies and others (historians, but also public intellectuals) who favor strengthening national history (and boundaries), and thus plead for an anti-global backlash.⁴

An Epoch under Siege

The very notion of the “Middle Ages” (*medium aevum*) as a designation for a historical period was forged in a polemical context: Renaissance scholars began to use it in order to identify a period from which they wanted to distance themselves. Since the fourteenth century, the confrontational term has served to demarcate modernity from an allegedly dark, barbaric, and (religiously) fundamentalist epoch. The more or less romantic counter-images of an age of social harmony in church, family, and community are merely the other side of the same coin.⁵ Feeling uneasy about such connotations, modern scholars started looking for alternatives: while some such as Otto Brunner promoted an “Old Europe” encompassing the period from Homer to

3. Peter Frankopan, “Why We Need to Think about the Global Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2019): 5–10, here p. 8.

4. Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>. See also Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, “Why Should We Care about the Middle Ages? Putting the Case for the Relevance of Studying Medieval Europe,” in *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving our Understanding of the Present*, ed. Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 1–29, here pp. 16–17; Damiano Matasci, “L’histoire mondiale: un modèle historiographique en question,” *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 71, no. 1 (2021): 333–46, here pp. 335–36.

5. See, for example, Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Die Gegenwart des Mittelalters* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); Oexle, “Das entzweite Mittelalter,” in *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter. Themen und Funktionen moderner Geschichtsbilder vom Mittelalter (Ausblicke. Essays und Analysen zu Geschichte und Politik)*, ed. Gerd Althoff (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), 7–28.

Goethe, or from circa 700 BCE to 1800 CE, others limited this *Alteuropa* to the late Middle Ages and the early modern period (1200–1800).⁶ Jacques Le Goff argued for an extension of the “Middle Ages” up to circa 1800, without really engaging with the problematic nature of the term itself.⁷ Still others have proposed distinguishing between premodernity, modernity, and late modernity.

The global turn has given the unease a new quality: some medievalists have quite radically called for the complete abolition of the term “Middle Ages,” arguing that not only was it charged with a series of ideas that had nothing to do with the actual medieval world, but it was also useless from a global historical perspective.⁸ Another suggestion, based on analogous reasoning, has been to put the notion in quotation marks and thus draw attention to the problem.⁹ Propositions for an alternative and more comprehensive labeling include, for instance, the “Eurasian millennium” proposed by Michael Borgolte,¹⁰ while the editors of the fifth volume of the *Cambridge World History*, which covers the period from 500 to 1500 CE, opted to call the era the “Middle Millennium.”¹¹

The discussions about adequate chronological thresholds and the heuristic value of established categories have also been fueled by recent (albeit all too slow) developments in the social composition of academia. Since the nineteenth century, Medieval Studies has been the domain of predominantly white, male, and middle-class historians with a Christian socialization. This might not be very surprising if we perceive Medieval Studies as, in essence, a “Eurocentric” subject that is mostly focused on the history of “Europe” between the fifth and the

6. On Otto Brunner, see Reinhard Blänkner, “Von der ‘Staatsbildung’ zur ‘Volkwerdung.’ Otto Brunners Perspektivenwechsel der Verfassungshistorie im Spannungsfeld zwischen völkischem und alteuropäischem Geschichtsdanken,” in *Alteuropa oder Frühe Moderne. Deutungsmuster für das 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert aus dem Krisenbewußtsein der Weimarer Republik in Theologie, Rechts- und Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Luise Schorn-Schütte (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1999), 87–135, here pp. 117–19. For alternative positions, see Christian Jaser, Ute Lotz-Heumann, and Matthias Pohlig, eds., *Alteuropa – Vormoderne – Neue Zeit. Epochen und Dynamiken der europäischen Geschichte (1200–1800)* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012).

7. See, for example, Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* [2014], trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

8. Bernhard Jussen, “Richtig denken im falschen Rahmen? Warum das ‘Mittelalter’ nicht in den Lehrplan gehört,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 67, no. 9/10 (2016): 558–76.

9. Geraldine Heng, “Early Globalities, and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique,” *Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory* 26, no. 2/3 (2014): 234–53, here pp. 235–39.

10. Michael Borgolte, “Hat sich das Mittelalter erledigt?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/alternativ-begriff-fuer-mittelalter-eurasisches-zeitalter-15760171.html>. The notion has been recently used in a slightly modified way by Dorothea Weltecke, *Minderheiten und Mehrheiten. Erkundungen religiöser Komplexität im mittelalterlichen Afro-Eurasten* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

11. Benjamin Z. Kedar and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *The Cambridge World History*, vol. 5, *Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

fifteenth centuries.¹² It becomes highly problematic, though, when we take the challenges of “becoming global” seriously: the ensuing effects cannot be limited to debates on theory, methodology, and thematic approaches, but necessarily include the discipline’s sociological composition. The problem became highly visible in the debates surrounding the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2017, with its thematic strand on “Otherness.”¹³ Its effects do not merely concern the accessibility of Medieval Studies for PoC scholars (important as this is!), but also touch upon questions that are immediately related to the scientific production of the field. Reduced to its essence, the question is whether representatives of a once hegemonic culture—the effects of which still linger on—can claim to provide an adequate picture of a significantly more diverse past. The present paper is not the place to analyze this specific debate in more detail, but initiatives such as Medievalists of Color (MoC) certainly raise crucial questions.¹⁴ These questions point us not only to “medieval” phenomena that have been hitherto largely ignored, such as the presence of PoC in medieval England and other parts of Europe,¹⁵ but also to the abusive presence of “medieval” motifs, usually in highly distorted ways, in the ideological universe of extremist right-wing groups and other similar movements.¹⁶

At first glance, this might not seem particularly related to the theoretical and methodological impact of global history on Medieval Studies, but the ensuing debates and conflicts are intimately connected with the acceptance and interpretation of what the construction of the “global Middle Ages” implies—not least because they frequently move beyond a scholarly quest for knowledge and veer into the realm of politics. As the sometimes vitriolic debates about the recent *Histoire mondiale de la France* have demonstrated, the development of new, global

12. See Charles West, “‘European History and ‘Eurocentrism’: A Conversation between Dina Gusejnova (LSE) and Charles West (Sheffield),” *History Matters*, May 12, 2021, <http://www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/eurocentrism-conversation/>.

13. See, for example, J. Clara Chan, “Medievalists, Recoiling from White Supremacy, Try to Diversify the Field,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 16, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/medievalists-recoiling-from-white-supremacy-try-to-diversify-the-field/>.

14. See the MoC website, <https://medievalistsofcolor.com/>, which indicates a particularly active phase in 2017 and 2018; see also the blog *In the Middle*, <https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/>.

15. See Onyeka Nubia, “Who Was the Ipswich Man?” *Our Migration Story*, s.d., <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-ipswich-man>; W. Mark Ormrod, Joanna Story, and Elizabeth M. Tyler, eds., *Migrants in Medieval England, c. 500–c. 1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For the presence of “Saracen” converts to Christianity in thirteenth-century France, see William Chester Jordan, *The Apple of His Eye: Converts from Islam in the Reign of Louis IX* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

16. See, for example, the contributions in Andrew Albin et al., eds., *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). While the phenomenon of political abuse is by no means new, older publications tended to ignore the effects of this on popular culture. See, for example, János Bak et al., eds., *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters, 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009).

perspectives can produce hostile reactions from authors who fear the loss of their “historic identity.”¹⁷

Compared to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Middle Ages still seem to fall slightly outside the spotlight of current debates, which tend to focus on race and identity. This situation may well change rapidly: after all, there are excellent reasons to pinpoint the Middle Ages’ role as an ideological building block of a “Western civilization” that can appear predominantly white, European, and Christian.¹⁸ The growing criticism of that Western civilization as an ideological category and political myth will presumably also have a greater impact on historical Medieval Studies in the future.¹⁹

Splendid Isolation before 1500?

While these debates might become more prominent in the not-too-distant future, historians of medieval Europe have so far taken up the “global challenge” primarily by underlining the presence and effects of transcultural contacts and intercultural exchanges. The European Middle Ages is, however, frequently construed within a twofold national framework: interpreted as being at once the cradle of Europe and that of national realms,²⁰ the purpose of its study has often been to construct the origins of historians’ own (modern) nations. While some studies in this older tradition allowed for a degree of contact with extra-European protagonists and cultures (such as the diplomatic exchanges between the Carolingian courts and their Abbasid homologues),²¹ the nation-state and/or its predecessors provided a quasi-*natural* frame.

Yet even when we consciously include global perspectives, we have to account for the specificities of a premodern world that was, in purely quantitative terms, far less interconnected than that of later periods. Whether and how medieval history needs to respond to globalization at all—and, more specifically, how it should approach it on a theoretical level—is thus a pertinent question. Europe’s relations

17. Patrick Boucheron, ed., *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2017). See also in the present issue Richard J. Evans, “Global Histories of Modern Europe,” *Annales HSS (English Edition)* 76, no. 4 (2021): doi:10.1017/ahsse.2022.12.

18. Current debates have a strong background in postcolonial theory and appear particularly vivid in the United States. See, for instance, Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

19. See Jerome Jeffrey Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul, eds., *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of “The Middle Ages” outside Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

20. For a critical analysis, see Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

21. See Michael Borgolte, *Der Gesandtenaustausch der Karolinger mit den Abbasiden und mit den Patriarchen von Jerusalem* (Munich: Arbo-Gesellschaft, 1976); Kirill Dmitriev and Klaus Oschema, “‘Abbāsīd Caliphs and Frankish Kings,’” in *Baghdād: The History of a Metropolis*, ed. Jens Scheiner and Isabel Toral-Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2022).

with “the world” before 1500 were not hampered by national, let alone continental borders, and travelers who crossed the Urals, the Bosphorus, or the Mediterranean did not perceive their voyage as being “intercontinental.” However, long-distance trips remained relatively exceptional: the vast majority of people lived in mostly regional, or even local, spatial and cultural contexts. Learned people and scholars were of course keenly aware that the earth was spherical and that the inhabited ecumene consisted of three parts: Asia, Europe, and Africa. The practical effects of this knowledge, however, are still open to debate.²² While the very notion of “Europe,” for example, had its own history in the Middle Ages, its use was far less political and identity-driven than in the modern period.²³

There are, of course, well-known and spectacular exceptions to the regional orientation: crusaders, pilgrims, and merchants crossed the Mediterranean; the Varangians traveled from Scandinavia to the Black Sea and Constantinople; the merchants of the Hanseatic League established outposts between Novgorod and Bruges; merchants from Genoa and Venice provided the West with spices and goods from Asia, which they acquired in the Levant; a few thousand western Europeans even reached the Far East through the Mongol Empire from the thirteenth century onwards. Oral, written, and pictorial accounts of these journeys to faraway places entertained Europeans, fired their imaginations, and possibly increased their willingness to explore distant regions, thereby contributing to a mentality that might have furthered the later European expansion.²⁴ Based on the resulting interconnections, Janet Abu-Lughod saw the emergence of a first “world system” in the age of Mongol rule, that is, in the thirteenth century²⁵—a concept that has proven highly inspiring, in spite of all criticism. More recent studies have deepened our knowledge, for instance through the analysis of trade and relations in the Indian Ocean region.²⁶

While the existence of wide-ranging, interconnected networks in this period (especially after the turn of the millennium) can hardly be doubted,²⁷ their relative importance remains open to debate. Referring to the increase of global interaction

22. See Klaus Oschema and Christoph Mauntel, eds., *Order into Action: How Large-Scale Concepts of World Order Determine Practices in the Premodern World* (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2022); Christoph Mauntel, “The T-O Diagram and its Religious Connotations: A Circumstantial Case,” in *Geography and Religious Knowledge in the Medieval World*, ed. Christoph Mauntel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 57–82.

23. Klaus Oschema, *Bilder von Europa im Mittelalter* (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2013).

24. The relation between theoretical ideas of world order and individual or collective action is discussed in Oschema and Mauntel, *Order into Action*.

25. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

26. Éric Vallet, “L’océan Indien vers 1300. Le ‘monde’ de ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī al-Kūlamī,’” in Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public, *Histoire monde*, 309–25.

27. See, for instance, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed., *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Eric Ramirez-Weaver, “Islamic Silver for Carolingian Reforms and the Buddha-Image of Helgö: Rethinking Carolingian Connections with the East, 790–820,”

after the year 1000, Valerie Hansen has spoken of the beginning of “globalization.”²⁸ This invites further discussion—about the importance of the quantity of interactions, but also about the implicit idea of a more or less linear movement towards integration, since even the more tangible processes of modern globalization knew (and know) instances of disintegration.²⁹

If these contacts across “continental borders” could lead to both integration and disintegration, analogous phenomena that took place *inside* Europe itself are of similar, perhaps even greater importance.³⁰ The observation that “European cultures, like all cultures, developed through complex processes of appropriation, adaptation, and hybridization”³¹ fully applies to the Middle Ages too—“global” influences must thus be weighted in a nuanced way. Robert Bartlett described the “Europeanization of Europe” as a process in which large parts of the continent developed a relatively high degree of cultural homogeneity.³² This process was not peaceful and voluntary, but driven by a belligerent aristocracy and Christian missionaries in search of new territories to rule, new revenues, and new faithful. The consequences were dramatic, and societies on the geographic periphery that resisted conquest and assimilation largely became either marginalized or “Europeanized” during the High Middle Ages. Research in medieval history has thus necessarily dealt with phenomena that more recently have been considered on a global level. At the same time, we have to allow for the fact that global interconnectedness, which has become increasingly visible in the modern period, was far more limited in the medieval era, as was mutual awareness between societies.

A Global Middle Ages?

Phenomena of intercultural exchange, migration, and (cultural) adaptation, but also comparative approaches, are therefore familiar to medieval historians, who usually focus on processes within the European continent. Because fixed “national” borders played at best a minor role before the fifteenth century, Medieval Studies as a field

in *China and beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections*, ed. Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (Amherst: Cambria, 2014), 171–86.

28. Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

29. See the research program of the Käte Hamburger Research Center in Munich, “Dis:connectivity in Processes of Globalisation” (established in 2021).

30. See, for instance, Michael Borgolte et al., eds., *Europa im Geflecht der Welt. Mittelalterliche Migrationen in globalen Bezügen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012); Borgolte et al., eds., *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011); Borgolte et al., eds., *Mittelalter im Labor. Die Mediävistik testet Wege zu einer transkulturellen Europawissenschaft* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008).

31. See the introduction to the present issue: David Motadel, “Globalizing Europe: European History after the Global Turn,” *Annales HSS (English Edition)* 76, no. 4 (2022): doi:10.1017/ahsse.2022.2.

32. Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1993).

produced an ambivalent picture: oriented towards the “national,” it was nevertheless confronted with numerous cross-border processes such as Christianization, “Europeanization,” the commercial revolution, Scholastic thought, and many more. The so-called Barbarian invasions,³³ the Islamic conquests at the beginning of the Middle Ages, or the spread of plague in the fourteenth century can hardly be told as national histories—even if their study also warrants (or even necessitates) a regional or local perspective in the sense of “glocalization.”³⁴

Due to the recent emphasis on global perspectives, historians are paying greater attention to far-reaching effects.³⁵ This observation does not just concern global studies, however: attention to the cultural heterogeneity of Europe has also increased,³⁶ while a growing interest in transcultural phenomena means that numerous studies focus on contacts and exchanges beyond the borders of western Europe.³⁷ Areas of intensive cultural encounters at Europe’s borders and beyond have become important foci,³⁸ and broader geographical perspectives enable us to analyze far-ranging cultural phenomena such as the spread and heterogeneity of belief systems: the multicultural character of Christianity has become an important field of research that is increasingly including Christian communities in Asia and Africa.³⁹ The study of missionaries and travelers to the Holy Land and to eastern Asia, or of the relations between the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches (the “West” and “Byzantium”), constitute classic fields of medieval research. More

33. Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung. Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019).

34. Victor Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2016). See also, with a focus on the early modern period, the methodological observations by Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/C321009025>, and in John-Paul Ghobrial, ed., “Global History and Microhistory,” *Past & Present* 242, supplement 14 (2019).

35. See Martin Bauch and Gerrit J. Schenk, eds., *The Crisis of the 14th Century: Teleconnections between Environmental and Societal Change?* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

36. See, for instance, Michael Borgolte, *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen. Die Erben der Antike und der Aufstieg des Abendlandes 300 bis 1400 n. Chr.* (Munich: Siedler-Verlag, 2006).

37. See, among numerous other contributions, Wolfram Drews and Christian Scholl, eds., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); and Georg Christ et al., *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen. Mediävistische Perspektiven* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2016).

38. Klaus Herbers and Nikolas Jaspert, eds., *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich. Der Osten und der Westen des mittelalterlichen Lateineuropa* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007).

39. This is not limited to the medieval period; see Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet and Muriel Debié, *Le monde syriaque. Sur les routes d'un christianisme ignoré* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017); and Thomas Ertl, “Repercussions from the Far East: A Comparison of the Catholic and Nestorian Presence in China,” *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2015): 38–63. For a complementary perspective on Buddhism, see Tansen Sen, “The Spread of Buddhism,” in Kedar and Wiesner-Hanks, *Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict*, 447–79. See also the studies produced in the context of the project “Visions of Community: Comparative Approaches to Ethnicity, Region and Empire in Christianity, Islam and Buddhism (400–1600 CE),” <https://viscom.ac.at/home/>.

recently, particular attention has been paid to relations between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities around the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Taken together, these works show that contact with the “Other,” intercultural exchange, and interfaith relations had a deep impact on western European societies; they also demonstrate the fertility of including global perspectives in European Medieval Studies.

Since the turn of the century, a growing number of publications have explicitly envisaged the history of the Middle Ages in a global context. Initial attempts primarily led, as in the case of “European history,” to the accumulation of national or regional histories with rather weak systematic cross-references.⁴¹ The resulting collections often contain high-quality contributions that focus on particular regions of the world, but the interconnections between them tend to remain relatively subliminal.⁴² In the absence of a unifying narrative that makes the genuinely global dimension explicit, many leave its identification to the reader. More recently, this additive method is being complemented by studies that focus more directly on comparison and interconnections in specific thematic contexts.⁴³

The UK-based research network “Defining the Global Middle Ages” recently proposed a “combinative” method that “combines rather than formally compares case studies, and which sets the local and the global in dynamic conversation.”⁴⁴

40. The field of “Mediterranean Studies” has been profoundly inspired by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). For a number of pertinent studies see the series “Mittelmeerstudien,” inaugurated by the Center for Mediterranean Studies at the Ruhr-University Bochum. A monumental and ground-breaking forerunner was Shelomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–1993).

41. An important early exception is Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). A new synthesis will soon be published: Michael Borgolte, *Die Welten des Mittelalters. Globalgeschichte eines Jahrtausends* (Munich: C. H. Beck, forthcoming 2022).

42. See, for instance, Thomas Ertl, ed., *Die Welt 1250–1500* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2009); and Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Empires and Encounters, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015).

43. Johannes Fried and Ernst-Dieter Hehl, eds., *WBG Weltgeschichte. Eine globale Geschichte von den Anfängen bis ins 21. Jahrhundert*, vol. 3, *Weltdeutungen und Weltreligionen 600 bis 1500* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010). For court culture, see Ekaterini Mitsiou et al., eds., *Courts on the Move: Perspectives from the Global Middle Ages* (forthcoming); for dynasties, see Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); for political communication and practices, see Hilde De Weerd and Franz-Julius Morche, eds., *Political Communication in Chinese and European History, 800–1600* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), and the series “Macht und Herrschaft,” published by the Collaborative Research Center 1167 at the University of Bonn, “Macht and Herrschaft: Premodern Configurations in a Transcultural Perspective”; for endowments, see Michael Borgolte, ed., *Enzyklopädie des Stiftungswesens in mittelalterlichen Gesellschaften*, 3 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014–2017).

44. Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, “Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages,” in “The Global Middle Ages,” ed. Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, *Past & Present* 238, supplement 13 (2018): 1–44, here p. 3. See also the review by Roy Flechner, “How Far Is Global?” *Medieval Worlds* 12 (2020): 255–66.

Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power provide a remarkable complement, arguing that a “globalized cosmology” in the Middle Ages was not characterized by the integration of one’s own society into the world, but by the synthesis of all available knowledge concerning one’s own world. Hence, they conclude, the Aztec cosmos “was a truly ‘global’ cosmos, a view which saw every part of the world, physical, spiritual and natural, individual and communal, as interdependent.”⁴⁵ Something similar could be said for the worldview of other premodern cultures, including Latin Christianity.

Whether this approach, which does not rely on any specific spatial or intercultural characteristics, can successfully enrich current discussions remains to be seen—it certainly provides a conceptual reinterpretation that replaces a claim to “wholeness” with a more sophisticated concept of the global.⁴⁶ In contrast to earlier forms of “universal” or “world history,” recent approaches to global history offer a stronger thematic focus and the analysis of contacts and relations. This orientation initially led to a certain positivistic streak, with researchers being satisfied to simply identify any contacts at all. This can, however, no longer suffice,⁴⁷ and the insights provided by a global medieval history must go deeper—as indeed they already do in a number of thematic contexts: in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of Monica H. Green on the late medieval plague provides an impressive example.⁴⁸

Proposals and reflections like that of Dodds Pennock and Power might in fact prove helpful in overcoming the difficulties of providing a narrative that is able to capture the complexity of global phenomena. Recent publications have also tried to apply new narrative forms by collecting numerous “fragmentary” micro-studies.⁴⁹ While this approach has proven efficient and inspiring for the development of new perspectives beyond the field of Medieval Studies,⁵⁰ its obvious downside (which may also be interpreted as an advantage) is the loss of a synthesizing narrative.⁵¹

In a relatively surprising turn, the need to highlight regional or even local specificities (or at least to carefully differentiate between them) has also been

45. Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power, “Globalizing Cosmologies,” in Holmes and Standen, “The Global Middle Ages,” 88–115, here p. 105.

46. Borgolte, “Mittelalter in der größeren Welt”; for the perspective of literary studies see Heng, “Early Globalities.”

47. Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 67–72.

48. Monica H. Green, “The Four Black Deaths,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (2020): 1601–31.

49. Patrick Boucheron, ed., *Histoire du monde au xv^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris: Fayard, 2009), combines thematic and regional surveys with short essays on individual events and sources.

50. See Boucheron, *Histoire mondiale de la France*; Matasci, “L’histoire mondiale.”

51. For an example concerning Europe in general, without a specific focus on the medieval period, see Christophe Charle and Daniel Roche, eds., *L’Europe. Encyclopédie historique* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2018).

underlined by recent research on climatic developments: while climatic shifts were no doubt one of the phenomena that could influence premodern cultures most perceptibly on a global scale, detailed analyses have shown that we have to take regional variabilities into careful consideration.⁵²

Finally, another thorny question lingers in the debates about the relation between premodern European history and global history: Does premodern global history necessarily recount the origins or prehistory of the “Great Divergence,” that is, of the rise of Europe as a world power in the modern period? The answers to this question have varied greatly in the past, but frequently the intercontinental comparison has been used to suggest that Europe’s allegedly singular development began in the Middle Ages.⁵³ Dissenting voices have not been absent, and the development of positions can be highly instructive. In 2009, for example, Robert Moore argued that the upheaval of the eleventh century saw the beginnings of a “First Great Divergence” between Europe and China, since educated elites became crucial to political institutions in the West, while kinship groups continued to dominate in the East.⁵⁴ In 2015, Moore distanced himself from this “simplistic teleological polarisation,” suggesting that the crisis of elites in Eurasia in the early second millennium is better interpreted as a “Great Diversification.”⁵⁵

Is this the course of research as a whole: a shift from a European master narrative to global particularity? And would this help us to understand why countries in western Europe were relatively poor at the beginning of the Middle Ages and relatively rich at the end?⁵⁶ Or were they not? Or do we not want to know? In any case, an adequate description of the relations between Europe and “the world” still constitutes a historiographic challenge—and remains inextricably entangled in political implications. In writing this narrative, it is not enough to simply focus on one particular region outside Europe and one or more regions within Europe: comparative and transcultural studies considerably enrich our field, but they are no more “global” per se than studies that touch upon two or three realms in Europe are “European.”

52. See Bruce M. S. Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Bauch and Schenk, *The Crisis of the 14th Century*.

53. Michael Mitterauer, *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of its Special Path* [2002], trans. Gerald Chapple (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

54. Robert I. Moore, “Medieval Europe in World History,” in *A Companion to the Medieval World*, ed. Carol Lansing and Edward D. English (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 563–80.

55. Robert I. Moore, “The First Great Divergence?” *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015): 16–24.

56. See Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal about the Future* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

What Remains (To Be Done)?

Interestingly, the most vivid debates currently focus on questions of terminology, particularly concerning the very notion of the Middle Ages itself. Some claim to use it as a basically neutral container, pragmatically indicating a time-frame; others criticize it (with good reason) as a Eurocentric construct. Insisting on abolishing the term merely on the grounds that it has allegedly prevented “real” global history would, however, be misleading.⁵⁷ This argument not only relies on a “realistic” interpretation of the label “Middle Ages” (hardly helpful for an adequate understanding of language in general), but also flies in the face of all those who have published excellent and inspiring studies on the “medieval globe”—including historians who have used the designation in their work on non-European regions. In any case, historians should use the term more consciously and carefully explain how and why they apply it in a specific context. Incidentally, some of the greatest works on medieval history that transcend traditional spatial boundaries, such as Shelomo D. Goitein’s *A Mediterranean Society*, get by perfectly well without the phrases “Middle Ages” or “global history.”⁵⁸

Raising the level of consciousness might be a helpful start, but it does not solve the problem of the notion’s European origins, which understandably provokes irritation when it is used for periodization in non-European contexts. Interestingly enough, the concept of the “Middle Ages” is equally problematic for an understanding of European history as such, albeit for different reasons.⁵⁹ A convincing alternative would therefore be welcome, but promising candidates are very few and far between. On a very pragmatic level, researchers in Medieval Studies should also be aware of the concrete and unwanted effects alternative denominations might entail. University departments that replaced the triad of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period with “premodernity,” usually did so not as a reaction to intellectual challenges but to reduce the number of academic positions in these fields. While this might even be understandable, given the continuous expansion of the “modern” period, the effect should not be neglected in the theoretical debates about the label that we use to designate the “Middle Millennium.”

In a more “scientific” perspective, the influence of the global turn on European medieval history remains hard to gauge. In all probability, it will not fundamentally change the scientific landscape of the field, but will (hopefully)

57. As argued by Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab. Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 11–31.

58. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*.

59. Coined to cover a millennium of mostly European history, the notion’s shortcomings include the homogenization of very different periods (the late Middle Ages having more in common with the early modern period than with the Carolingian era) and regions. See Jussen, “Richtig denken im falschen Rahmen?”; and Peter von Moos, “Gefahren des Mittelalterbegriffs. Diagnostische und präventive Aspekte,” in *Modernes Mittelalter: Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, ed. Joachim Heinze (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1994), 33–63.

enrich our studies and the analyses we produce—just as the preceding “turns” of recent decades have done. It seems unthinkable that we would simply dispense with the insights pertinent studies in this vein have provided—not least the idea that we can no longer treat characteristics of medieval European cultures as default positions for the premodern world. At the same time, the majority of studies on medieval history will continue to deal with topics that have a connection to one or more regions within Europe—though this does not preclude further debates driven by the rather political and social tensions between “globalists” and “regionalists.”⁶⁰ Related questions about the status of history in society will continue to occupy us, such as whether it should be an instrument to strengthen national cohesion and transmit certain values to immigrants and their descendants, or rather make it possible to experience the entire diversity of human pasts. Apparently, both contradictory needs coexist—and this also applies to writing Europe’s medieval history.

One practical outcome of the “global” influence might consist in a productive reorganization of historians’ practices. While the publication of a monograph still constitutes a kind of gold standard in academia, adequately covering phenomena in their global context requires skills (first and foremost linguistic) that a single researcher can hardly possess. Working on “global” subjects can help to establish more cooperative forms of work amongst medievalists, thereby creating international and intercultural networks that will push us to overcome the idiosyncrasies of each researcher’s own position. Such a development is not without its pitfalls, however, not least that cooperation on this scale requires an accepted medium of communication, and everything points to English becoming the most important *lingua franca*. We should be aware that this creates new inequalities (not everyone is a native speaker) that will need to be counterbalanced by conscious efforts to valorize *all* the contributors’ specific skills and perspectives. The “global Middle Ages” should not become another project co-opted by elites educated at Western universities to put a friendly face on globalization and celebrate materially well-off cosmopolitans in their new lifestyle.⁶¹ The challenges must be met in (at least) two ways: first, by discussing the “dark sides” of intercultural integration, including the marginalization and destruction of cultures and communities; second, by effectively integrating non-Western historians of the premodern era.

Finally, there is the question of whether the global Middle Ages is (or should be) the prehistory of globalization. Some indicators seem to imply this, but perspectives have already begun to shift. Interaction between regions is no longer automatically understood as positive, nor as a form of globalization.⁶² In the twentieth century, many authors sought the origins of Europe’s special path in the Middle Ages; in recent decades, medievalists have started to marginalize

60. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

61. Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?”

62. Heng, “Early Globalities,” 242–45.

a “backward Europe,” emphasizing the progressiveness of the Islamic world or the Chinese Empire.⁶³ Without careful reflection, however, these new histories risk simply telling yet another teleological prehistory of globalization, albeit with different markers.

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63. See, for instance, Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab*. This particular effect of the practice of “provincializing Europe” is rarely made explicit, but is often perceptible in the “tonality” of pertinent contributions. See Jennifer R. Davis, “Western Europe,” in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans (Leeds/Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press/Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 349–92, especially pp. 359–60 and 378, which underlines the asymmetry in perceptions of contacts between the Abbasid caliphate and the Carolingian courts; or, more explicitly, Richard L. Smith, “Trade and Commerce,” in Hermans, *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, 425–75, here p. 425. For the late Middle Ages, see the careful observations by Bernd Schneidmüller, *Grenzerfahrung und monarchische Ordnung. Europa 1200–1500* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011), 226.