



BRILL

Introduction

Medieval history still suffers from the bad reputation that started with the Renaissance invention of the irrelevant and negatively charged “middle age” between the idealized classical period and its alleged revival.¹ “Medieval” subsequently acquired and still retains a multitude of negative connotations, from unusual cruelty to being backward and primitive.

Such views about the historical period also have historiographical implications. Medieval studies are often considered to be peripheral to international scholarly debates concerning the humanities and social sciences.² Although their object of study is a far-away world, this fails to provide the benefit conferred by fashion and the status of being exotic that favor other fields of study. Medieval history thus seems to suffer from the cumulative disadvantages of Eurocentrism and archaism.³

Modernists often see medieval history as parochial and unconnected to historiographical advances. Medievalists themselves are prone to borrowing theoretical models and frameworks for historical explanation from modernists, perhaps in an attempt to increase the discipline's relevance to outsiders. Recent examples include debates about categories of the colonial and post-colonial,⁴ research focused on provincializing Europe and decolonizing history and the social sciences at the same time; and increasing interest in the

1 Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948).

2 Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, eds., *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving our Understanding of the Present* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

3 For a recent discussion of these questions, see the essential article Thomas Ertl and Klaus Oschema, “Les études médiévales après le tournant global,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76, no. 4 (2021): 787–801, English version, “Medieval Studies after the Global Turn,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, First View, 1–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ahsse.2022.11>; Etienne Anheim, “Moyen Âge,” in *Généralisations historiennes (XIX^e–XXI^e s.)*, ed. Yann Potin and Jean-François Sirinelli (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 2019), 487–503; and Etienne Anheim, “Le Moyen Âge et les boucles du temps. Entretien avec Thomas Angeletti, Quentin Deluermoz et Juliette Galonnier,” *Tracés. Revue de sciences humaines* 36 (2019): 227–248. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/traces.9712>.

4 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).

“global Middle Ages.”⁵ Global history and other new paradigms, however, are based on modern events and patterns of development. These theoretical models constructed on modern evidence do not easily fit pre-modern history.

To engage with these issues, and specifically in order to concentrate on developing a better framework for the analysis of premodern transfers of knowledge, we have organized two workshops, together with Sylvain Piron, one at the EHESS, Paris, and one at the University of Cambridge, which resulted in this collection of articles. A Cambridge Humanities Research Grant, with additional funding from the DAAD-University of Cambridge Research Hub for German Studies with funds from the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) enabled us to organize this intellectual exchange, and we are grateful for this opportunity. We could thus draw on three distinct academic traditions: those of France, Germany and England. Comparing these traditions enriched our enterprise. Our investigations also lie at the crossroads of two historiographical trends of the recent decades. One researches translations and the circulation of knowledge between the Byzantine, Islamic and Jewish worlds and Christian Europe. The other considers the development of global, transnational and connected history.

These two historiographical fields remained, until recently, relatively distinct from each other, until the advent of the “global Middle Ages.”⁶ The “global Middle Ages” exports the designation “Middle Ages,” which had been developed in a specifically European context, to other geographical areas, and ignores the very real differences between the period and the globalized present world. We would like to query the paradigm of medieval interconnections through close attention to how knowledge exchange operated. How should we conceptualize the circulation of medieval knowledge both historically and in light of the historiography? To what extent does this circulation of knowledge allow the construction of models and concepts that differ from those currently dominating international debates, even to the point of fashion? To

5 Michael Borgolte, “Mittelalter in der größeren Welt: Eine europäische Kultur in der globalen Perspektive,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 295 (2012): 35–61; Jérôme Baschet, “Faut-il mondialiser l’histoire médiévale?” in *Histoire monde, jeux d’échelles et espaces connectés*, ed. Didier Panfili and Esther Dehoux, Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2017), 13–36; Peter Frankopan, “Why We Need to Think about the Global Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2019): 5–10.

6 See the article by N. Berend in this collection. See also “L’histoire européenne après le tournant global.” Special issue, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76, no. 4 (2021), especially Ertl and Oschema, “Les études médiévales après le tournant global”; Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, eds., “The Global Middle Ages.” Special issue, *Past & Present* 238, supplement 13 (2018).

what extent does research on knowledge exchange facilitate the analysis of the medieval world?

We need to remember that the medieval world was “pre-colonial.” This category, utilized for example by Kim M. Phillips, has been little exploited thematically, despite the considerable bibliography dedicated to the post-colonial.⁷ It is rare to find the concept, except in works on the history of Africa, for example by Richard Reid,⁸ to designate the period before the continent was subjected to the political and military domination of European countries. The concept of the “pre-colonial” is thus used here above all to describe the former condition of the non-European world, the historical study of which should not be over-determined by later colonisation. Camille Lefebvre and M’hamed Oualdi rightly emphasized the “temporalities of the colonial moment,”⁹ underlining that one should not reduce the history of non-European societies to the colonial dynamics of modern times: one must envisage the colonial question as one stage in a long-lasting process, and not as the only perspective, as is often the case, for the study of these societies.

Yet in the same vein, the history of medieval Europe is also pre-colonial, and even if medieval society engendered the dynamics of expansion and conquest, as suggested by Jérôme Baschet, who sees in the colonisation of the Americas starting in the sixteenth century the extension of the socio-economic dynamics of European feudalism,¹⁰ one should pay attention to that society without teleology. But even more, it is important to reflect, in the case of Europe, in a symmetrical way on the postcolonial critique. Certainly, the precolonial world, in Africa or in Asia, must be studied by decolonizing historiography. But the medieval European world must also be the object of such a movement: we must wonder about the way in which the modern West has not only colonized space, but also time, by making the Middle Ages its ideological foundation, therefore by literally colonizing the Middle Ages. After all, medieval Europe was more “pre-national” than “transnational,” so that it is also necessary to denationalize the Middle Ages, and one could also conceptualize it as

7 Kim M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245–1510* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), especially “Afterword: For a Precolonial Middle Ages,” 199–201.

8 Richard Reid, “Past and Presentism: The ‘Precolonial’ and the Foreshortening of African History,” *The Journal of African History*, 52, no. 2 (2011): 135–155.

9 Camille Lefebvre and M’hamed Oualdi, eds., “Temporalités du moment colonial.” Special issue, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 72, no. 4 (2017). English version: “Temporalities of the Colonial Moment,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ahsse.2021.3>.

10 Jérôme Baschet, *La civilisation féodale: De l’an mil à la colonisation de l’Amérique* (Paris: Aubier, 2004).

“pre-global,” not because circulation at a worldwide level between far distant places did not exist, but because there was no conceptualization of networks in a global space as such.

Yet at the same time, we must be wary of an anachronistic engagement with concepts. First of all, it is well known that when we use concepts to describe medieval society, we are not limited to the register of the medieval vocabulary itself, to what was expressed or conceivable at the time. But, secondly, we must remember that even if medieval history itself was pre-colonial, pre-national and pre-global, this is not the case when it comes to the historiography. The development of medieval history as a discipline, since the nineteenth century, took place in the context of European nations’ practice of colonization, not only of non-European geographical space, but also of the past.¹¹ Thus the medieval period itself was nationalized and colonized in European modernity, similarly to how it is now “globalized,” at a different stage of the development of modernising ideology.

What kind of history of the Middle Ages, connected, total, open, would we write if we took this retrospective colonization of the Middle Ages by the modern West seriously? Without pushing this questioning more profoundly in this special issue, it must nevertheless be on our agenda now, to be pursued in the future. It is in this sense that we should understand the project that, since the 2000s, has sometimes been called the “decolonization of the Middle Ages”:¹² as a critical historiographical undertaking dissecting the traditionally employed categories to write the history of the Middle Ages, but also as a way to evoke the complexity of temporal articulations between the past and the present and the capacity for the ideological projection of modernity onto the Middle Ages. As a result, the issue becomes that of knowing what global history, and the paradigm of circulation that is attached to it, can bring to the analysis of the Middle Ages, what they reveal, and what they may hide.

Indeed, the medieval world was a world of circulation, but these movements were not necessarily determined by the same rules as those due to globalization, and one should highlight these contrasts. In particular, one should consider that the evident Eurocentrism, which, despite all efforts of provincialization, nonetheless governs modern historiography, does not apply to the Middle Ages. That, in turn, does not mean that a “history of equal parts,”

11 Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Catherine König-Pralong, *La colonie philosophique: Ecrire l'histoire de la philosophie aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2018).

12 John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer, “Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 431–448.

to use Romain Bertrand's expression,¹³ is easier to accomplish for the Middle Ages, which also suffers from the asymmetry of documentation and forms of domination. Moreover, neither does it mean that one cannot find in medieval Europe the seeds of hegemonic projects of the following periods.

These considerations propelled us to question what the specificities of the medieval period were in terms of the types and processes of the circulation of knowledge and practices. The idea of medieval domination itself has to be revised, to avoid ahistorical absolutization; we are not faced with rigid entities, such as modern states, but more malleable social and political forms, which at the same time can be more encompassing, such as the Church or the Ummah, and which cannot be reduced to "religions" in the modern sense.

We propose then that medieval evidence is not merely interesting for its own sake, but also provides fertile ground for creating theoretical models for phenomena that escaped the analytic scope of modernist theories. Instead of imposing models based on European expansion, colonial and postcolonial theories, and globalization, we would like to take seriously premodern and precolonial patterns of the circulation of texts and people in order to theorize knowledge exchange. In particular, we focus on a basic paradox at the heart of medieval Christianity: the borrowing and reuse of fundamental texts and ideas from belief systems that were at the same time explicitly rejected as false.

Medieval Christians borrowed basic foundations (sacred texts) on which they constructed a Christian identity; key elements of philosophical, scientific, medical knowledge and law arrived from Judaism and Islam, and were incorporated into medieval intellectual life. Thus basic reference texts, the foundations of European culture, knowledge, and identity were borrowed, and new knowledge continued to enter Europe. Such an ex-centric creation of identity coupled notions of superiority to avoid incorporation (but often through reinterpretation). To what extent were these borrowings seen as incorporating elements from outside Christianity? How was borrowing from Judaism, Islam, and Byzantium reconciled with negative views of Jews, Muslims, and, increasingly in the central and later Middle Ages, Byzantine Christians in Catholic Europe? What were the modalities of borrowing?

The articles show that in many cases, small groups and individuals with specialized knowledge facilitated knowledge transfer: erudite authors who wrote on medical questions, those writing legal contracts, Biblical exegetes. On the other hand, populations, such as the Franks in the Crusader states, living in proximity to local populations could adopt local food products and ways of

13 Romain Bertrand, *L'histoire à parts égales: Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident, xvi^e–xvii^e siècle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2011).

cooking. Minority populations, such as Jews in medieval Europe, could also be influenced by the surrounding Christian majority: thus the Christian transformations of the figure of Rachel ended up influencing Jewish understandings. The mechanism of transfer and borrowing demonstrate that there was a thirst for scientific knowledge, so Christians borrowed from the otherwise despised Muslims when it came to medical texts, but they mostly eliminated the traces of the alien religion. At the same time, they rendered some of what was borrowed incomprehensible by transliteration rather than the translation of names. Further, generations of Christian scholars reworked the translations, thus the incorporation of the borrowed knowledge was a fluid process rather than a one-off translation that was absorbed. Christians similarly decontextualized Biblical figures borrowed from Judaism, as the example of Rachel demonstrates. Christianity appropriated the Hebrew Bible as “the Old Testament” and invested Biblical figures with new Christian meanings. Borrowing could depend on networks of scholars, but also on individuals who migrated. Individuals moving to a new location took texts and saints’ cults with them, which flourished in new contexts. Thus saints’ cults that originated in Egypt could be transplanted to Italy: a Greek manuscript written in Calabria, and its Latin translations, as well as the moving of relics to Rome popularized the cults in their new location. Here too, we find a series of translations and transcriptions transmitting knowledge about the saints, with variations influenced by the active agency of the copyists.

In situations of conquest, Christian conquerors borrowed from conquered Muslims, even while waging wars justified by religious rhetoric against them. This was the case both in the crusader states of the Levant and the Iberian peninsula. Highly technical know-how of both legal customs and food practices were thus transferred. These Muslim practices and terminology were incorporated into the customs of the conquerors and their language. Because of the significance of ensuring proof of rightful property transfers, even Arabic documents of land sales were preserved in Christian ecclesiastical archives.

Borrowing, from everyday know-how through scientific knowledge to religious ideas, could be done without explicit stock-taking. Thus borrowing from despised groups was made easier, all the while leaving bias and hostility undisturbed, as it was not accompanied by self-reflection on the process itself. This was further facilitated by decontextualization, whereby ideas, texts, and objects were given a radically different meaning, divorced from their original context.

The forms of expansion and circulation were therefore fundamentally different in the pre-colonial context, as was the articulation between domination and what one could call “translation.” The latter term signifies not merely the

practice of transposing one linguistic content into another language, but more generally, a system of negotiations and transactions, a generalized conceptualization of “translation” as an intercultural model. Within such intercultural “translation” even forms of domination must undergo displacements, *translationes*, between languages, populations, and social practices. Therefore we offer the hypothesis that the medieval world allows us to observe a series of boundary-objects,¹⁴ in the sense used in the sociology of science and knowledge, that is, material artifacts, texts, and iconographic types, which make it possible to understand the construction and stabilization of communities, heterogeneous and asymmetrical, but capable of carrying out negotiation and translation processes of which, precisely, these artefacts are the support and the trace. This enabled a form of circulation that does not arise from modern globalization, from a European center, but from a plurality of reticular exchanges that we should not idealize as egalitarian or multicultural, because these exchanges could be profoundly asymmetrical, but which expressed a different type of relationship between society and space, and between domination and circulation. This plurality of circulations, indeed, puts globalization in perspective, similarly to nationalization or colonization, as not a natural, unavoidable phenomenon, but as a specific type of case among the more generalized practice of translation, that characterize human societies across time and space.

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14 Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–1939,” *Social Studies of Science* 19, no. 3 (1989): 387–420.