

## *The Future of Medieval History\**

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MEDIEVAL HISTORY is facing a time of troubles. In many colleges, course enrollments are declining. In many universities few students begin graduate work in medieval history, and even fewer finish it: they drift off into other fields. The decline is gradual, not abrupt; we can keep going at close to our present rate for another decade or so. But I wonder if the teachers of medieval history who are just beginning their careers will have as many excellent students as my contemporaries did and, indeed, if they will have any students at all by the year 2000. The generation of Charles Homer Haskins simply took it for granted that any civilized man would study medieval history. They could not conceive of a college, or even a high school curriculum, in which medieval history did not occupy a prominent place. My generation realized that a little persuasion was necessary and that a little time had to be surrendered to other periods of history, but we were sure that we could convince our colleagues and our students that medieval history deserved to have a key position in a liberal arts program. The new generation of medievalists will have to fight to keep medieval history in the curriculum at all, and, if it is retained, to keep it from being shoved into the back corner along with Sanskrit, Assyriology, and other subjects that are kept alive only through the efforts of a handful of specialists.

Part of our trouble results from forces that have been building up for a long time. There is so much more history now than there was in the 1920's — new approaches to history, new topics in history, new areas whose history must be investigated. Even if we had an absolutely fair share of the time available for the study of history it would be a small share — far smaller than it was in those simple days when a fully developed college program included only ancient, medieval, modern, and American history. And as far as graduate

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students are concerned, we suffer from the steady decline in the study of the classics over the last forty years. Few entering students really know Latin, not to mention Greek, and they are usually far from proficient in modern languages. And it is a real strain to learn two or three languages while acquiring the knowledge and techniques needed by a professional historian; there are easier ways to get a degree.

We could adjust to these long-range changes if we were not faced with other pressures. The vast increase in the number of students could compensate for the decline in the percentage of students taking medieval history. After all, five percent of a million is exactly equal to twenty-five percent of two hundred thousand. The language problem is not insuperable; methods of language teaching are improving, and in many fields, for example Russian studies, students seem willing to devote at least as much time to languages as is required for medieval studies. What has made a manageable problem almost unmanageable is a relatively sudden shift in attitudes toward history by some of our colleagues and by many of our students.

The more radical form of this shift is to deny that any field of history has any value. We live in an entirely new world; change in the last few decades has been so rapid that the past has become irrelevant. Human behavior can be understood only in terms of the present, because our society is completely different from any society that ever existed before. Nothing useful, nothing that would help in solving current problems, can be found in the historical record. History is simply a rather dull form of literature.

A less extreme version of the same idea admits that there is some value in the study of past societies, but minimizes the importance of observing continuity and growth. History is valuable only in slow motion and under extreme magnification. Societies can be understood only through knowledge of their structures. There is little to be learned by examining the origins and the development of any pattern of social relationships. What is important is to examine the pattern in one place at some fixed moment in time. If we really understood all the relationships that existed in one community at one time we would be close to formulating a science of society. Such a science would be worth far more than the fruitless speculations about causation and change that grow out of attempts to survey long periods and wide areas.

Whether they accept the extreme or the less extreme position,

those who hold these ideas are not likely to find themselves attracted by medieval history. When even the nineteenth century is irrelevant, the Middle Ages are incredibly remote. Industrial man has nothing in common with medieval man. And even if there were any sense in studying medieval society, the idea might as well be abandoned, because medieval society cannot be investigated in a satisfactory way. Lack of detailed information, especially quantifiable information, makes it impossible to use the new sociological and statistical techniques that are necessary if reliable results are to be achieved. Medievalists have nothing important to say; they simply amuse themselves collecting trivial information that cannot interest any sensible person.

This is the case against us. How much truth is there in it? What can we do about it?

There is some truth in it. Medievalists have spent time on trivial problems; they have accumulated odds and ends of esoteric learning of interest only to themselves; they have been rather supercilious toward those who know little about their field. Even their virtues have become faults. They love their period so much that they cannot understand — and hence find it hard to teach — those who lack their enthusiasm. They are rightly proud of the techniques that they have developed for dealing with very difficult materials, but the techniques have sometimes become ends in themselves. It is certainly good for a medievalist to edit a text; he will learn a great many things, including how carelessly he has read texts before. Again, it is essential to have critical editions of many texts. But to keep on editing texts without meditating on their meaning, or to edit a text just because it exists, without considering whether it is worth the effort, are not acts that win medievalists the esteem of their colleagues in other fields. Even worse, our fascination with the old techniques has often prevented us from using new techniques that would increase our knowledge of medieval society and make that knowledge seem more relevant to the new generation of students. We should never forget our greatest danger: we began as antiquarians and we could end as antiquarians.

But even admitting these weaknesses in medievalists, I believe that medieval history does have relevance in the modern world — perhaps more relevance than more recent and more tranquil periods such as the Victorian Age. To take a major point: the trouble with the world today is not so much rapid change as uneven change. Our thinking has not caught up with the increase in our productive capacity,

whether the product be new scientific theory, new technology, or new means of destruction. This is not an unknown problem in medieval history. More important, two-thirds of the world has not yet entered the new age which is supposed to make all previous experience irrelevant. This two-thirds of the world is politely called "underdeveloped." That is, it is very much in the position of western Europe in the Middle Ages, trying to build complex social-political-economic structures on a primitive agricultural basis, trying to absorb ideas and techniques from more advanced societies. As many historians have pointed out in recent years, Europe offers the first example of modernization, and the key period in the process comes during the Middle Ages. State-building, urbanization, the impact of new technologies, changing class structures, the search for a way to reconcile new interests and old beliefs — every problem that perplexes a developing society today can be found in the Middle Ages. Moreover, these problems can be studied with greater precision than is possible in dealing with a contemporary or nearly contemporary society. The rate of change was slower and easier to observe. The impulses that traveled along the nerves of the medieval body politic moved so gradually that sequences that are now telescoped into a few years were then spread out over decades, and can thus be examined at leisure. The number of people involved in any important development was very small. We can study them as individuals and avoid the error of making group ideas and group actions seem more uniform than they really were. For example, it is possible to know something about the life and work of almost every man who wrote on scientific topics between 1200 and 1300. Or, to go from the extreme of abstraction to the extreme of action, it is possible to learn a great deal about participants in urban uprisings. Usually only a few hundred men took part in these affairs; if local records are good we can determine the occupation, social standing, and often the wealth of many of the individuals involved.

The anti-historian can say, of course, that historical parallels, like those of geometry, never meet, and that reasoning by analogy is a poor form of reasoning. This is true enough; the trouble is that in dealing with human relationships no better form of reasoning is available. Faced with a new or changing situation, we all act on the basis of past experience; consciously or unconsciously, we all use analogies. If we are going to use analogies in spite of ourselves, then it is important that the analogies fit as closely as possible, and an analogy drawn from the Middle Ages will often fit better than one drawn from a more

recent period. It is less likely to be distorted by passion and by prejudice. The Norman conquest of England was an act of imperialism; it is much easier to examine the consequences of this act dispassionately than the consequences of the French conquest of Indochina.

There is also a wider range of human experience to draw on if we take our analogies from the Middle Ages rather than from modern history. While the number of mistakes that human beings can make in their relations with each other is not infinite, it is very large, and some kinds of mistakes are repeated only after long intervals. We are apt to concentrate on avoiding the errors of our fathers and by doing so fail to avoid the errors of earlier generations. When I first read about the Albigensian Crusade, some fifty years ago, I would have said that this was one type of evil that could not occur in the twentieth century. Now I wonder if we should not be re-examining the causes of the Fall of Rome.

Without being so apocalyptic, there are other types of error that are particularly well illustrated by events in medieval history. There is the error of trying to extend central authority over distant regions that feel no ties with the center (the Holy Roman Empire). There is the error of trying to impose alien institutions on a people who have had no previous experience with such institutions (the English in Ireland). There is the error of imitating external forms and failing to understand the actual functioning of a political system (Frederick Barbarossa's attempt to systematize German feudalism). There is the error of trying to speed up a process that is already developing about as fast as conditions permit (Philip the Fair and royal power), and the error of trying to slow down a process that is irreversible (the English in the last stages of the Hundred Years' War).

But enough of errors and mistakes. The Middle Ages were also a period of amazing success — a period in which a poor, rejected, outlying fragment of the old Mediterranean world caught up to and surpassed not only its ancestral civilization but also the neighboring civilizations that had descended from the common ancestor. The mistakes are not only obvious, especially in political and economic affairs: they are also easily explainable. The successes are just as obvious, but are much harder to explain. How did Europe, with very little outside help, stabilize its political system, expand its economy, absorb or create new technologies and new tools of thought? If we really knew the answer to this question we would have discovered a formula that students of the developing nations have not yet found. And I suspect that the

answer lies more in the realm of ideals, beliefs, habits of mind, than it does in the realm of economic and political organization.

Having said this, I must immediately add that political and institutional history is still important. Politics supplies a framework within which other forces operate and affects the ways in which they operate. The physical security provided by an effective political system does not guarantee rapid development, but its absence certainly works against development. The exact date of the coronation of Hugh Capet may not be important (though Lemarignier has given good reasons for thinking it was),<sup>1</sup> but the establishment of the Capetian dynasty affected the subsequent history of all of Europe. The arguments about when circuit judges first appeared in England may seem trivial, but the fact that circuit judges were used extensively in twelfth-century England made England different from all other European countries. The petty wars of thirteenth-century Italy are of interest only to the specialist, but the fact that the papacy became involved in these wars did more to weaken and discredit the Church than any heresy.

We have solved many of the problems of medieval political history, and we have the techniques and the materials to solve most of those that remain. We have done less well with social-economic history, and especially with the kind of social-economic history that would enable us to understand the way of life and the habits of mind of the middle and lower classes of European society. We have avoided significant problems, because we have thought that materials were lacking and that modern statistical methods could not be applied to the materials that do exist. We were wrong on both counts. There is a vast amount of material that has scarcely been used — 600 unpublished cartularies in France alone, to say nothing of the thousands of uninventoried items in departmental and municipal archives. Or, to take another example, it is only in the last few years that Professor Goitein has shown us how the thousands of documents of the Cairo Geniza reveal the mentality and business practices of Mediterranean traders.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, we have never exploited our materials as fully as we should have done. Through simple statistical methods we can squeeze much more out of our texts than we realized. One document proves nothing, but if one searches for the presence (or absence) of certain traits through thousands of documents, one can arrive at solid conclusions. Thus Kosminsky has enlightened us about the size of peasant holdings in England,<sup>3</sup> Herlihy about economic conditions in Italian rural areas,<sup>4</sup> Fossier about the settlement and exploitation of the

land in Picardy.<sup>5</sup> It is amazing how much can be learned just by counting, and modern techniques make counting much easier than it used to be.

Again, while it is nearly impossible for a medievalist to write a meaningful biography of an individual, it is possible to write a sort of collective biography of a class or a group by assembling hundreds of scraps of evidence. This kind of work is often more useful than the individual biography; it can reveal the texture of a society. The possibilities were demonstrated long ago by scholars such as Duby,<sup>6</sup> and some of my own students have used this method with considerable success.<sup>7</sup> A collection of collective biographies would be even more informative. To take only one example, we already know enough about the French civil service between 1250 and 1350 to say that the whole group — judges and lawyers, financial officials and provincial governors — was drawn from a rather narrow segment of the population. The lower upper and upper middle classes were heavily represented, but few officials came from the great noble families or from the artisans of the towns, and even fewer from the peasantry. There was also a geographical restriction. The old royal domain was the favorite recruiting ground; Burgundy and the Center were acceptable sources of manpower; Normandy, and even more Languedoc, were looked on with suspicion. Knowledge of the social and geographic origins of royal officials in turn explains some of the characteristics of French government during the period.

In short, we can now discover many new facts and frame many new hypotheses about the social-economic history of the Middle Ages. We can quantify more than we thought we could, and we can have a good time doing it. The kind of work I have been talking about has all the fascination of a good puzzle, and it involves the use of all the new, and therefore popular, techniques of the social scientist.

I am still worried, however. A shift toward social-economic history may satisfy our graduate students, but it will not necessarily attract a wider audience. Undergraduates and the reading public may still think of medieval history as an esoteric game. To calculate the population of Périgueux in the fourteenth century is no more interesting to the ordinary student than to establish the date of the coronation of Hugh Capet. We may find that we have merely exchanged one kind of private amusement for another, and that the new activity seems no

more relevant than the old. Why do we want these new facts and new hypotheses? How are we going to use them?

We need the new material, first, because a lot of our old generalizations (and some not so old) are erroneous and incomplete and, secondly, because many potentially useful generalizations have never been made. And it is these incomplete or nonexistent generalizations that might help us understand the developing part of the world.

To take one of the toughest problems first, it is hard to realize how incredibly backward European agriculture was in the eighth and ninth centuries, what a tremendous effort it took to increase production, how slow growth was. We can identify some of the significant innovations, but we are apt to exaggerate the speed with which they were adopted, e.g., use of water power, planting of field peas. Other problems have barely been touched. How was the appalling shortage of tools that is so apparent in Carolingian documents remedied? Who made the tools? Where did the iron come from? Even though only minimal quantities were needed, not every region produced its own iron. Did more iron in west Germany mean more wheat in eastern France? If it did, how were the exchanges arranged?

The last question raises another problem — that of early medieval commerce. We could probably find out more about the volume and character of trade in northern Europe. We are finding out a great deal more about Mediterranean trade and about the influence of Moslem and Jewish commercial law and practice on Europeans, especially on Italians. Italian businessmen may have borrowed more and invented less than we thought. On the other hand, because of this borrowing, Italian commercial and financial operations may have been quite sophisticated at a surprisingly early date.

To shift to another area, we do not know enough about medieval elites. We talk about the nobility or about the patriciate, but these words had different meanings for each generation and for each district. We have some excellent local studies; we need many more. And the allied question of social mobility, while not neglected, has certainly not received its final answer.

Two, at least, of the medieval elites — the clergy and the upper bourgeoisie — were educated elites. We know very little about the schools or the teaching methods that prepared men for a business life. We know a great deal about the universities, but how were boys prepared for university work? And what about the vast army of clerks — men who were technically in holy orders, men who could

rise to the highest positions in Church and state? Most of these men did not attend universities, yet they were educated, often well educated. How was this done? How was it done without elaborate educational organization or great expense?

Why — to combine an educational problem with one that requires an appraisal of the basic characteristics of western civilization — why did European scholars continue the study of science and mathematics when such studies were being abandoned by every other civilized society? All the reasons that have been given for the loss of interest in science by other people — lack of practical results, undue respect for ancient authorities, the rise of mysticism, dislocations caused by invasions and civil wars — apply to Europe. Moreover, it cannot be claimed that the achievements of medieval scholars in the field of science were so spectacular that interest in science was bound to persist, however unfavorable the environment. Obviously the scientific tradition persisted in Europe because it was part of a broader cultural tradition, but why and how did it become a necessary part of that tradition?

One final question, which brings us around the circle from economic, social, and cultural history back to political history. Medieval men had a strong sense of community, but the idea of community covered everything from the peasant village to the Commonwealth of Christianity. What were the different communities; how strong a pull did each one have; how did this attraction vary from generation to generation and from place to place? What were the *gentes*, the “nations,” of the early Middle Ages? The words can be taken in their literal sense if we are talking about a people like the Saxons, but how about the Aquitanians? How did a man know that he was an Aquitanian; what did it mean to him *if* he knew? How did these early ethnic or semi-ethnic loyalties become territorial loyalties, and why were some territorial loyalties more persistent than others? What is the difference between provincial loyalty, which everyone admits was strong, and national loyalty, which everyone says was nonexistent? Was England, given its size and population, anything more than a large province? And if we think of medieval England as a large province, does this help to explain some of the peculiarities of English history?

Everyone can probably think of other — and better — questions. The ones I have given are merely samples of the sort of work that needs to be done. If we do this kind of work, we are certainly going to be busy, and we may become schizophrenic. On the one hand, we

need a vast amount of detailed knowledge that is not now available. On the other hand, we must find meaning in this detailed knowledge as we accumulate it. It is not easy to do both tasks at the same time, either as individuals or as a group. But both tasks must be done, and must be done simultaneously. If we merely accumulate, we shall sink into the pit of antiquarianism. If we generalize without finding new material and reworking old material, we shall soon discover that we have nothing to say to coming generations of students. But if we have both new knowledge and new ideas about medieval society we might be able to give our students some insights into the problems of a troubled world.

### NOTES

1. J. F. Lemarignier, "Autour de la date du sacre d'Hugues Capet," *Miscellanea Medievalia in Memoriam Jan Frederik Niemayer* (Groningen, 1967), pp. 125-35.
2. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol. I (Berkeley, 1967).
3. E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England* (Oxford, 1956).
4. David Herlihy, "The Agrarian Revolution in Southern France and Italy, 801-1150," *Speculum*, XXXIII (1958), 23-41.
5. Robert Fossier, *La Terre et les hommes en Picardie*. 2 vols. (Paris, 1968).
6. Georges Duby, *La Société aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953). Another excellent example of the value of this method may be found in Bernard Guenée, *Tribunaux et gens de justice dans le bailliage de Senlis à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1963).
7. John Freed, "The Mendicant Orders in Germany 1219-1273"; Rhiman Rotz, "Urban Unrest in Hamburg and Braunschweig at the End of the 14th Century"; Jan Rogozinski, "The Lawyers of Lower Languedoc." All three theses are deposited in the Princeton University Library.

### BOOKS RECEIVED

This list was compiled from the books received between 1 January 1970 and 15 May 1971. The publishers and the editorial board would appreciate your mentioning *Medievalia et Humanistica* when ordering.

Don Cameron Allen. *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. Pp. x, 354. \$12.00.

*Anglo-Norman England 1066-1154* (Conference on British Studies Bibliographical Handbooks), comp. Michael Altschul. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. Pp. xii, 83. \$5.95.

Frank Barlow. *Edward the Confessor*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970. Pp. xxviii, 375, 16 illustrations, 4 maps, 2 genealogical tables. \$10.95.

Charles Béné. *Erasmus et Saint Augustin ou Influence de Saint Augustin sur L'Humanisme* (Université de Paris Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines). Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969. Pp. 472.

Davis Bitton. *The French Nobility in Crisis*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1969. Pp. vii, 178. \$6.50.

Morton W. Bloomfield. *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice* (Harvard English Studies I). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970. Pp. 287. \$6.00.

William M. Bowsky. *The Finance of the Commune of Siena: 1287-1355*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pp. xx, 379, 3 plates, 3 maps. \$16.00.

John D. Boyd, S.J. *The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968. Pp. xiv, 317. \$7.50.