

The Medieval Centuries

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This book is an attempt at a succinct synthesis of European Medieval history from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the dawn of the Modern Age brought about by the transatlantic voyages. It looks for the 'grand duree' and eschews anecdote and particulars. It is about power, the struggle for it and its consolidation. A struggle fought out not only among feudal lords and the ultimately victorious kings but also about ecclesiastic and commercial. It brings into doubt the traditional view of society as feudal, based upon a hierarchy of servitude, but brings out the complementary aspects provided by the intellectual power exercised by the church, which was both intimately intertwined and separate from the worldly scene, and the capitalistic muscle brewed in cities. The period spans one thousand years and hence dwarfs in temporal extension the subsequent history of the modern.

The Roman empire disintegrated slowly, first by a split into two halves, of which the western part, the one pertinent to our story, fell apart ahead of the eastern, whose death-throes were far more extended. What does it mean to say that an empire disappears? To people living at the time it might have been hard to pinpoint the exact time when the empire was gone, in fact if such a point can be defined at all, even retrospectively. What it entails is a slow erosion of central authority, the formal aspects of which may linger on far longer. Into that vacuum left by the disappearance of Roman emperors all kinds of migrating hordes entered. The time is one of confusion, illustrated by differently colored arrows sweeping across and bifurcating on the pages of historical atlases. When central power is gone, local power centers assert themselves coming into conflicts the resolution of which more often than not involves the annihilation of one, sometimes of both sides of a dispute. What is the basis of power? Land! And the particular European feudal system evolved, based on a hierarchy of servitude, the basis of which consisted of the peasantry tilling the earth. Power was maintained by warlords who enlisted support by parceling out lands to underlings with the understanding that in exchange the latter would provide armed men, preferably mounted, as the cavalry provided the mainstay of military efficiency (a tradition whose sentimental associations would make it survive, however obsolete, into the 20th century). With time those holdings, referred to as fiefs (cognate to the Germanic word 'Vieh, (f)' indicating movable cattle), became more and more permanent, subtly changing the relationships between lord and his vassals. The situation also became riddled with complications by the fact that a vassal could swear obedience to many lords, who might potentially be at loggerheads. What saved it from anarchy was the ability of the kings, the apexes of the feudal pyramids, to consolidate their powers, which in practice meant the establishments of nations. But this building of nations proceeded differently. It was successful in France and England, while in Italy and Germany it foundered, and those states would be fragmented until the 19th century. The first serious contender for reviving the lapsed Roman Empire was Charlemagne head of the Franks, a Germanic tribe

conquering what is now referred to by its name. Hereditary traditions invariably involved the splitting up of nascent empires, and the descendants of Charles the Great carved it up and the imperial torch was taken up by the Germans, whose emperor soon however, would be one in name only, while the fiction of the Holy Roman Empire provided the first instance of a tradition that would, unlike its ignominious third, last for a thousand years, and only be formally dissolved as a result of the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century.

But the sword was not the only contender for power, there was also the Church. The Christian Church had undergone a radical transformation, from having been a congregation of persecuted sects leading a precarious existence of furtive defiance, into a state religion mustered by Constantine (later known as the Great) for, one presumes, purely real-political ends. While the early Church had been an otherworldly religion carried by a fervent moral ideology, the established Church became a player in the game of Caesar, and as it would develop it was often hard to distinguish the man of God from the man of the sword, often the same physical person acting both roles without any unease. Feudal life involving the sharing of landed property to a growing set of descendants put a pressure on territorial expansion, soon to be a zero-sum game in western Europe, and thus an outlet was for some of the breed to follow a clerical career, which provided its own parallel pyramid, with the lowly and underpaid parish priests at the very bottom, and then up through deacons and bishops all the way to the apex of the Pope.

The political power of the Pope was initially rivaling that of the emperors, the well-known story of the German emperors' wintry excursion to Canossa, proves to be irresistible to the author. Ostensibly this was about the worldly power submitting to the spiritual, but ultimately it was nothing but a shrewd public-relation move, that consolidated the tottering power of the former. In the end the kings would prevail, but that did not mean that the Church drew the shortest straw, its political influence remained high, as did its revenues and accumulated wealth, the dismantling of which proved to be the motivating force of the reformation that broke the hegemony of the Church and ushered Europe into the Modern Age.

The worldly expansion of an established Church led to reactions, such as the forming of monasteries, which when not challenging the earthly power of the Church were tolerated, indeed even encouraged. Those reactions hankered back to the early unworldly church, to which poverty was an ideal, but of course once those movements became established themselves, such as the order founded by Francis of Assisi, accumulation of wealth became an important feature in their activities. Real heretic movements did appear at the end of the period, and they were clamped down by force, and only became victorious in a later century when backed by princely power.

The Church was indeed corrupt, and many of its Popes were roughs and scoundrels. The abuse of office extended deep down into the hierarchy, and as the author notes, the beneficial reforms and good works affected by a succession of devoted bishops would be quickly overturned by the impetuous acts of a succeeding rake. Still the intellectual life was channeled through the church, whose need of a minimally educated base, inadvertently set up an educational system, involving universities, with ramifications well beyond their intended purposes. By the 13th century the Old Greeks had been discovered, through the routes of the Arabs, and fervent intellectual discussions ensued, in a context known as

Scholasticism, in which ancient paganism was to be reconciled with Christianity, spurring metaphysical speculations and attempts at proofs of Gods existence. One usually attributes the split of intellectual discussion from a theological context to the emergence of what is usually denoted as humanism. This happened in the 14th century and the figure head is Petrarch¹.

Trade has always been a feature of organized human society, and the Medieval centuries were no exception. Trade meant the emergence of cities, walled protective zones of interchange of commodities. The emergence of towns in northern Europe as well as the revival of ancient and dormant ones in the south spelled the development of yet another independent power-base, not an ideological or political one, but a commercial one, which in its incipient capitalist structures undermined the traditional feudal structure of the society. Towns may have been resented by the vassals, although welcomed by kings as sources of revenues, nevertheless established ties with the nobility, the worldly as well as the ecclesiastic. Many a town contained castles of the local vassals as well as episcopal seats of sees.

But the basic source of economy was agricultural, land ultimately being seen as the hard currency of wealth. But agricultural land was not tended very efficiently but pursued on basically a sustenance basis, which put an upper limit on the population, and ensured that until fairly recently the great majority of people were tilling the land². In western Europe most of the arable land had been put under the plough at a fairly early date, only in Germany and the east where there still frontiers during the Medieval centuries. Population grew slowly and erratically with constant setbacks due to famines and pestilence, the Black Plague being the most spectacular. It is sometimes claimed that the disasters of the 14th century significantly changed the social fabric, by making labour scarcer and hence more valuable, leading to an improvement of the standard of living.

The sword and the crucifix were united in a common quest during the second half of the period, through the crusades, initially successful forays to roll back the Muslim advance, and to ensure the return of the Holy Land. But those crusades soon came to grief as the dissenting Turkish tribes reunited and used superior technical and logistic military power against straggling and inept western excursions, and their only lasting achievement was to further undercut the power of Byzantium, and thus to weaken overall the Christian power, which would only rally through its later transatlantic expansion.

The need for a constant frontier is a prerequisite for any dynamic social structure, a fact reiterated as a mantra by modern-day spokesmen for international corporations. The momentous conquests of the seas leading to not only transatlantic colonizations but to alternate trading routes with the orient, may be seen as the crucial feature, making Europe reign supreme and transcending its medieval past. The first steps were not taken by the English or the French but by the relatively recently revived Christian nations of the Iberian peninsula, especially the Portuguese barred from the Mediterranean and exclusively facing

¹ Thus it antedates the fall of Constantinople, which involved a spread of ancient manuscripts to the west

² China and India are the only significant powers in which the rural population still outnumbers the town-dwelling, in fact the greatest event of the 20th century may have been the largely unsung migration from country into city.

the Atlantic. The sea-route found by Vasco di Gama solved the problem Columbus had tried to tackle five years earlier, and decades before that Portugese sailors had discovered and incorporated mid-atlantic islands. Their marine supremacy only lasted for a century, but their traces are still with us to this day.

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