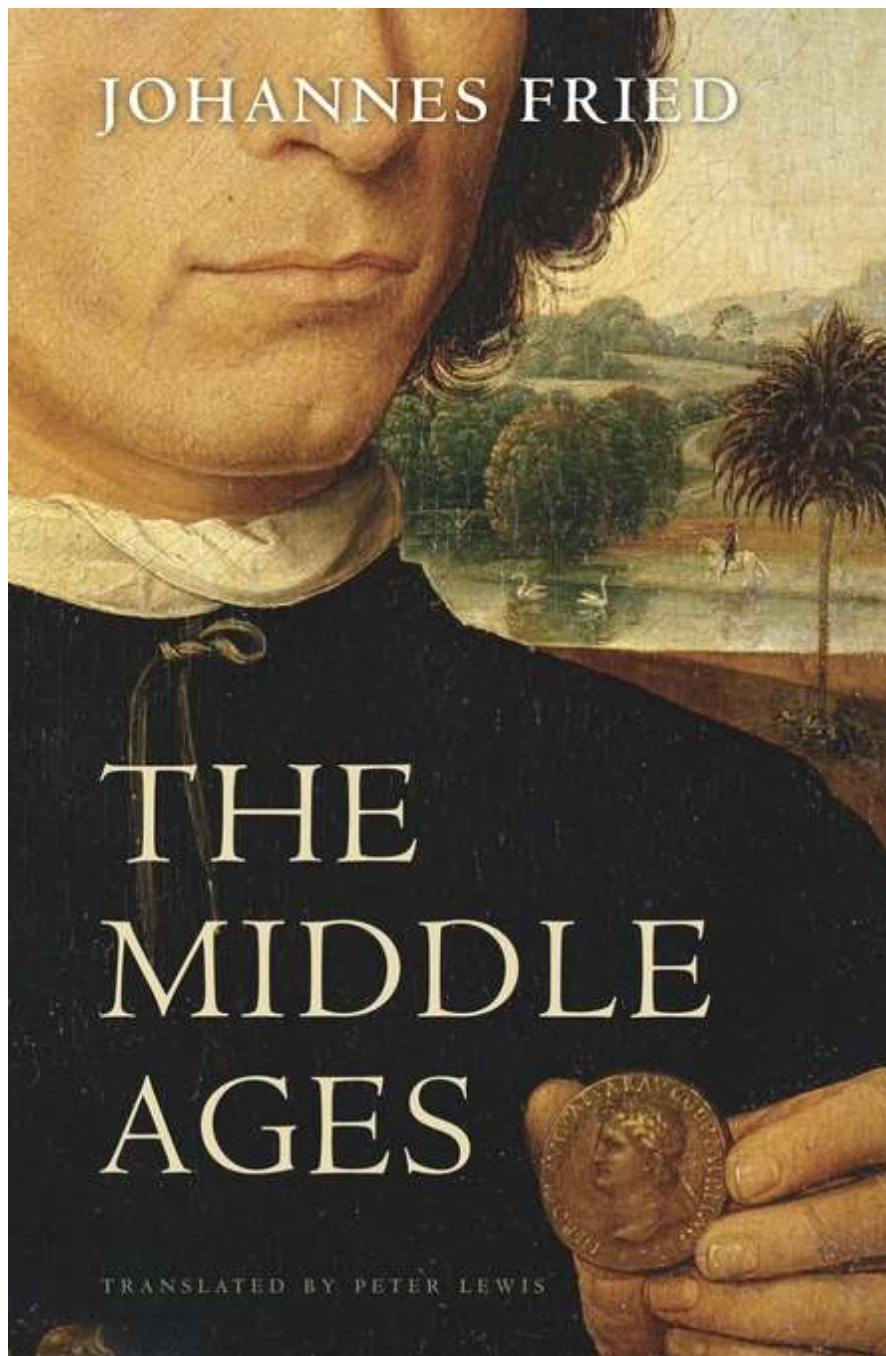


☰ Rome Is Never Far Away: A Review of *The Middle Ages* by Johannes Fried

28 April 2015 (<http://www.christianhumanist.org/2015/04/rome-is-never-far-away-a-review-of-the-middle-ages-by-johannes-fried/>) / Nathan P. Gilmour
(<http://www.christianhumanist.org/author/ngilmour/>) / History
(<http://www.christianhumanist.org/category/history-2/>)



Nathan P. Gilmour (<http://www.christianhumanist.org/author/ngilmour/>), 28 April 2015.

The Middle Ages

By Johannes Fried (trans. Peter Lewis)

652 pp. Harvard University Press. \$35.00

Johannes Fried saves the programmatic aim of his book for the last chapter, but I'll begin with it: unlike their counterparts in China or India or really any other center of historical civilizations, Europe has a particular disdain neither for its oldest period nor for the most recent but for the middle age (507). Some, and Fried chooses his countryman Immanuel Kant as their chief, regard the middle ages as an age lacking in the beauty of the ancient world and without the dedication to reason that his modern counterparts share. He holds Gothic architecture in particular contempt (506). Just as bad, Fried notes, are those who would romanticize the middle ages, ignoring the truly radical thought of characters like Meister Eckhart and William of Ockham, whose philosophical explorations set the stage for the most radical thought of what Kant would regard as his own era's Enlightenment (508). In his masterful book titled simply *The Middle Ages*, (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674055629>) Fried begins with Boethius and wends his way to Machiavelli in a campaign against such dismissals and such flattening accounts, telling a tale of political thought and philosophical exploration and most importantly of complexity at every step, a journey through Western Europe's middle millennium that encourages the reader to think of the period as a truly fruitful period of intellectual, political, and social transformation.

From Boethius to Charlemagne

Fried's story begins with Boethius, the Roman consul serving a Gothic emperor and translating Greek philosophy into Latin prose. A charge of treason, deserved or not, ends Boethius's work on translating Aristotle's books with the *Organon*, the collection of logical treatises that came to introduce Europe, in the first Christian millennium, to processes at the core of reasoning (2). Figures as diverse as Charlemagne and the Paris scholastics come to benefit both from his translations of Aristotle and from his *Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue nominally free from mention of Jesus but nonetheless borrowing greatly from Augustine's notions of divine knowledge, the privative character of evil, and the eternal nature of mortals' true desires (4). Boethius does meet his demise too soon, but his writings preserve in Europe (the Byzantine empire, comparatively speaking, retained more of the old books) what might have been the lost art of logic for kings' courts and monastic schools alike.

The Visigoths and Ostrogoths, tribes from central Asia as far as history can tell, do not at first destroy Rome as preserve what they respected most in Rome, its networks of roads and structures of political control (9). But eventually, as more and more wars shake western Europe, and especially as the Franks rise to prominence, Romans come to be simply the legendary Ancients, a nebulous memory of a city that persevered in the East up until the death of Justinian but fell into serious decline not long before a new heir to the ancient lore, the Muslims, arose and swept through the southern and eastern Mediterranean basin (19).

With the gradual decline of those roads and that exchange of written political ~~order~~ and all that came with them, Europe loses the continent-spanning sense of common identity, leaving a vacuum into which the great kings of the Franks stepped (22). As the Roman court, with its need for educated ministers, fell into disrepair, learning in western Europe by and large becomes the province of the popes, beginning with Gregory the Great, and of the monastic orders, whose (possibly legendary) founder St. Benedict establishes orderly communities in which reading and writing remained intelligible not in the service of an empire but of a mission, the evangelism and thus the Biblical teaching of the surrounding lands (30).

When Charles of the Franks starts his grand campaign to re-unify Europe, he does so with the help of careful and systematic organization of his resources, which requires educated ministers, which by the ninth century meant bishops and monks, which means that Charlemagne, for reasons entirely fitting for an ambitious warlord, did much to save Latin scholarship in Europe (53). The texts that scholars like Alcuin produced in this period picked up on some of the grand logical projects left behind by Boethius and by extension Aristotle, with new tasks ahead as they attempted to think systematically about the relationships between the scale of human affairs next to the scale of divine providence (57). Rhetoric and logic become more important than they had been since the fall of the Republic as ever more expansive territories and ever more diverse populations had to be instructed and convinced to live as subjects of a new, Holy Roman Empire (60). To his credit, Pope Leo III seized the moment and hitched the Church's wagon to the indubitably brilliant star in Aachen, and the Pope's crowning the Emperor set the stage for what would become the Church's universal self-conception and indeed continent-spanning influence (65). As Fried has things, the eighth and ninth centuries were not "dark ages" that forsook reason but were their own age of reason, certainly wildly different from Kant's version of the same but no doubt a moment in which logic and rhetoric must make genuine advances to keep up with the new politics and the new theology and all of the historical change that comes with the rise of the Holy Roman Empire.

Vikings and the New Millennium

If the Goths and the Saracens and the Franks had their turns as the most terrifying forces in Europe, the Vikings could not be far behind, and these master ship-builders, who revolutionized travel over the sea, became such a cultural force that not only do their legendary ancestors become the main characters in the great English poem *Beowulf*—whose praises Fried sings as one of the monuments of vernacular medieval poetry (85)—but their conversion to Christianity does not dull their military edge but gives them the intellectual capital to seize and to conquer northern France and eventually England (92). In the Holy Roman Empire, during the same period, the Ottonian era brings new advances in political theory (Fried argues that this might be the roots of "the political" in the modern sense) as Otto developed complex systems of forestry rights, honors due to various ranks within the court, and other logical distinctions for the sake of

organizing the empire (103). In the same period the monastic reforms at Cluny, ~~most~~ most importantly in the procedures of the confession of sins, lays ground for the philosophical examination of the believer's inner life that will in centuries to come develop into psychology (114). Once again Fried shines as an intellectual historian, showing that the structures of empire and monastery and kingdom and such always come with new requirements for legal and social and psychological thought, once again putting a strong challenge to any who would regard this period as devoid of serious developments in the life of the mind. All of this, of course, happens within the framework of Christian theology, which as an all-encompassing mode of thought lends vigor and form to the political and the existential and all other modes of thought, and Fried deals with theology's day as queen of the sciences even-handedly, neither suggesting that Christianity is identical with Enlightenment thought nor pretending that what we know as the Enlightenment would have been possible save for the developments of the Christian era.

As the year 1000 approached and came and went, the ongoing Viking wars, along with continued tumult in theology that gave rise to the middle period's signature heresies, led to a great cultural anxiety (119). The tenth century, leading up to the millennium, featured great advances in logic and dialectic (127), and in the years that followed, the invention of four-staff musical notation opened up frontiers in music that the ancients could never have imagined (129). Increasing sophistication in the ways people wrote about fealty and loyalty to kings and lords leads to yet another great innovation of the period, a more logically sophisticated vocabulary for naming the separation of the secular power of the monarch from the spiritual power of the priesthood (135). Not coincidentally, the same period sees the rise in the West of the celibate priesthood (139) and the college of Cardinals as a "Papal Senate" (143). Once again, to state what is likely evident, Fried presents a picture of the period, not only from the twelfth century forward but all the way from Boethius to Machiavelli, that is always in motion and stepping beyond what fragmentary heritage they inherit from the Greeks. When Fried does get to the Renaissance later, he will narrate that regaining of Greek texts and philosophical thought as yet another moment in Europe's ongoing aspiration to be the true Rome, not as a simple return to the greatness that was Athens but as a moment in which a venerable master, Greece returns to a student, medieval theology, who has in many ways surpassed the original. Thus the Scholastic period as well as the age of the original Christian Humanists resemble conversations among giants far more than one-way tutelage relationships.

Mendicants and merchants are the characters who move the next part of the story forward. Fried certainly does not shy away from the apocalyptic fervor of the Crusades but notes that, in the same decades that see kings and knights and children off to eastern Europe and to the Levant to butcher and to be butchered, the real intellectual engines of the twelfth century are merchants, who develop ever more sophisticated modes of thought to keep up with expanding reaches of

trade and to keep one step ahead of the Church's futile attempts to ban usury (472). As French and Teutonic knights head off to do battle against Seljuk Turks (160), the independent Italian city-states rise in the vacuum left by a declining Holy Roman Empire (176). During this period the famous debates among Italian writers extolling the relative worth of militia forces and mercenaries begins, to reach its apex three hundred years later in Machiavelli's work, while the landed cavalier class gives way both to citizen-infantry and to professional armies as the premier military force on the Italian peninsula (201). Even as Provençal poets start to sing the praises of Arthur as the ideal king and knights as the height of martial virtue, historical change is beginning to render knights obsolete as actual fighting forces.

Meanwhile, regarding the Crusades themselves, Fried notes that once again complexity is the order of the day if one is to tell their story properly. European Catholics' violence against Eastern Christians and Jewish communities and eventually Palestinian Muslims is without a doubt at the core of the story, but at the margins is the beginning of an exchange of ideas that will lead to the scholastic recovery of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* as well as the first, eleventh-century (!!) translations of the Qur'an into Latin (207). Between the merchants and the Crusaders and the new orders of mendicant preachers, more exchange between monastic and Byzantine and Muslim centers of learning once more accelerates the development of dialectic in western Europe, and one of the story's heroes in this period is Peter Abelard, whose intellectual work in theology and dialectic stands as far more interesting to Johannes Fried than do his romantic exploits (207 ff.). Among other things Abelard articulates one of the first logical refutations of anti-Semitism (209) and begins to articulate a vision of theology rooted in dialectic as well as dogma. More broadly the same period sees unprecedented collections of teachers and writers in places like Paris and Oxford and Bologna, giving rise to the university (215) and the concentration of intellectuals away from the monasteries and royal courts, though Fried always notes that these first university-educated Europeans as often found employment in royal and imperial courts as interpreters of the increasingly complex legal systems of those places as they did in ecclesial schools teaching priests to preach and to practice the ever-deepening sacrament of confession.

Friars, Mongols, and Philosophy

Those who know and love Dante know that Heaven's intellectuals appear to the pilgrim in two processional lines, and a Dominican (Thomas) and a Franciscan (Bonaventure) introduce them. What I didn't know was that both orders, each dedicated to learning, rise to prominence from particular European needs. The Dominicans become Europe's premier heresy fighters, studying philosophy and rhetoric with unparalleled intensity precisely so that they can persuade the people of the intellectual futility of Cathar and Waldensian and other heresies and then to instruct priests in logic so that they do not develop their own sloppy-thinking deviations from the best theology (261). On the other hand, the Franciscans, whose rivalry with the Dominicans was fierce and sometimes violent,

took the science of confession to a new realm of precision, developing theories of ~~intention~~ that allow confessors to distinguish between seemingly identical acts (263). For both of these orders mobility becomes key to their influence: because they are (nominally) celibate orders without family roots in a place, their influence is greater than their numbers normally would allow (266). Fried, who does not seem to have any particular loyalties to the twenty-first-century Catholic Church, nonetheless recognizes at every turn that developments in theology lay the groundwork for sciences that we moderns know as political theory and economics and psychology and a whole range of other inquiries. His account favors the eventual secular turn more than the account given by John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory*

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1405136847/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1405136847&linkCode=as2&tag=harthelaswor-20&linkId=C5UNLWTW6FUNW6TL)>Theology%20and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason), but both writers share a healthy respect for the debt that modern thought owes to the high middle ages.

Likewise Fried notes that, when the armies of the Golden Horde began to rage across eastern Europe, the military might of the Hungarian knights was no match for the highly organized cavalry legions they encountered, but in generations following, the missionary bishops and the enterprising merchants proved more than capable of expanding Western ways far into the greatest military empire the world has ever seen (284). On the other end of Eurasia Alfonso X of Castille began to bring astronomy, logic, and other forms of learning to the expanding Spanish kingdom, always benefiting from the strong Muslim heritage of the area but never stopping there, seeking to synthesize the newly expanded philosophical corpus with Christian-era political and spiritual realities (301). Fried pauses as well to note that, in the game of chess, Alfonso also invented checkmate as the standard end to a game of chess (302). By the time the main force of the Khans' armies fall to the Mamelukes of Egypt (313), leaving the old Baghdad caliphate in ruins, Europe is ready to turn another corner into the grand fourteenth century, the age of Dante and Petrarch and Ockham and Chaucer.

Before launching into the story of the late middle ages, Fried pauses to marvel at the breadth of intellectual innovation that Europe sees in the high middle ages.

Although Constantinople becomes the seat of the Roman Empire after the fall of Tiberian Rome, by the high middle ages just about all genuine advances in philosophical thought was coming neither from Constantinople nor from Baghdad (which, as mentioned before, was in ruins) but from Paris and Oxford and other western European universities (337). As the law codes of Justinian come back into circulation in Italian schools, Bologna becomes a center for legal studies (338), and in that school, around 1208, the legal scholar Azo becomes the

first (that Fried mentions, but I'm inclined to trust his story) to describe **scholarship** as a progressive activity that adds new knowledge as generations continue to work (339).

In the realm of philosophy conceived more broadly, the thirteenth century sees Albertus Magnus write that the study of natural things does not in its normal course involve the occurrence of miracles (341), and the fourteenth century sees William of Ockham begin to question theology's place as a science in its own right (358) and Meister Eckhart articulate a rationalism so radical that many still mistake it for mysticism (359). Perhaps most shockingly to those who would romanticize the middle ages as an era in which all mortals shared a common veneration for divine and earthly hierarchies, the *Gesta Romanorum*, a fourteenth-century narrative collection, presents a dialogue between four philosophers striving together to account for the injustice and wickedness of the world around them. In response, the final speaker in the dialogue simply says, "*Deus est mortuus*," "God is dead" (363). No narrator steps in to strike the philosopher dead with lightning, and the text lets his take on things, that there will be no judgment after death, stand as stated. Once again Fried revels in the diversity and power of human reason in the period, a spirit of inquiry that certainly does not stand identical with eighteenth-century Scotland but nonetheless deserves recognition as a site of genuine intellectual development.

Gutenberg and the Journey into the Modern

Perhaps my favorite phrase in *The Middle Ages* arrives when Fried calls Gutenberg's invention the harbinger of "a bloodless revolution" (368). Leading up to that fateful moment, once again the book's strength is that it neither flattens the grand intellectual blaze of the high and late middle ages nor denies that the work of intellectual giants like Giovanni Pico de Mirandola, Desiderius Erasmus, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Martin Luther were anything but a grand swerve in the course of intellectual history (372). By the time Dante versifies a sitting pope into *Inferno*, William of Ockham accuses the Pope of heresy (401), and the Holy Roman Emperor pays a state visit to the King of France, not as overlord but as peer (438), the age of kings, emperors within limited realms but never again fully subject to the Pope, was upon Europe. Improvements in navigation and timekeeping position Portugal to become a new world power, leading the way in exploration (453), and the protest movements of Wycliffe and Hus shake even further the tenuous spiritual empire that, after all, never did hold sway in places like France, where the "Most Christian King" (391) never quite submitted to papal supremacy the way that England and other kingdoms did (444, 481). Frederick III is the last Holy Roman Emperor actually crowned in Rome (494), and the rest, as they say, is modernity.

Most of what I relate in this review I had known, at least in outline. Fried does not go out of his way, with a few exceptions like the fourteenth-century "God is dead" bit, to produce previously-unknown texts or artifacts. Instead, the book's main strength is its breadth and unrelenting focus on intellectual development in Europe between Boethius and Machiavelli, a grand narrative that has Europe

develop as a grand intellectual power not in spite of the great Catholic intellectual tradition but flowing precisely from that well. Fried ends his book with a stern reminder that European intellectuals, even and especially those of the Enlightenment, are “heirs to the age they denigrated, not its conquerors” (524). Ultimately Fried’s counsel to all of us is to be more medieval in a key way: to think of ourselves not as self-made minds but as heirs to a grand treasure of thought (524).

Share this:



Tagged [Boethius \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/boethius/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/boethius/), [Charlemagne \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/charlemagne/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/charlemagne/), [Dominicans \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/dominicans/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/dominicans/), [Franciscans \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/franciscans/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/franciscans/), [Holy Roman Empire \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/holy-roman-empire/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/holy-roman-empire/), [Johannes Fried \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/johannes-fried/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/johannes-fried/), [The Middle Ages \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/the-middle-ages/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/the-middle-ages/), [Vikings \(http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/vikings/\)](http://www.christianhumanist.org/tag/vikings/)

The Christian Humanist Podcast, Episode #161: The Devil Takes Visa
(<http://www.christianhumanist.org/2015/04/the-christian-humanist-podcast-episode-161-the-devil-takes-visa/>)

The Pietist Schoolman Podcast, Episode #3: Borderlands and Bridges
(<http://www.christianhumanist.org/2015/04/the-pietist-schoolman-podcast-episode-3-borderlands-and-bridges/>)

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *