

Book Review: The Middle Ages

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*In Johannes Fried's **The Middle Ages**, the author makes his case for an alternative interpretation of the medieval period as much more sophisticated than commonly thought, writes **Ignas Kalpokas**. The book intricately traces how ideas and systems of thought that we now consider quintessentially modern European ways of life, thinking and culture stemmed from this time period.*

The Middle Ages. Johannes Fried. Harvard University Press. 2015.

The Middle Ages are perhaps the most controversial historical period of them all. Although its profile has been increasing steadily ever since the denigration of all things medieval by Enlightenment (and, to an extent, Renaissance) scholars, still relatively few studies do it justice. Johannes Fried's *The Middle Ages* is notable in this context as an attempt to portray the period as much more modern and sophisticated than commonly thought. In fact, for the author, the Middle Ages, rather than being a lost epoch, contains the seeds of what we are today.



Methodologically, this volume strikes an interesting balance between different ways of writing history. It is comprehensive almost to the extent of the traditional grand narratives that used to present a sweeping panoramic image of the entire period, neatly fitting everything into the right place. And yet, one would struggle to find grandiose generalisations and subjugation of facts to the overall narrative – traits that plagued traditional historiography. In fact, there is not even one grand narrative but rather multiple narratives that constitute a mosaic while avoiding a teleological narrative. The focus is on individuals and the context in which they lived but this book is equally not a set of conventional narratives about great leaders that have shaped history. Instead, Johannes Fried uses individuals – scholars, philosophers, political and religious leaders – to help him elucidate contexts, ideas, shifts, and breakthroughs, i.e. to present snapshots of particular periods within medieval history. And yet, those individuals are sufficiently concrete to avoid generalising them into representatives of a broader kind e.g. 'a medieval monk', a medieval knight', 'a medieval monarch' and so on. Finally, despite concentration on particular

individuals, places, and circumstances, the volume does not slide into the domain of microhistories that present only a small locality in very particular circumstances and concentrating on the banalities of everyday life. On the contrary, the snapshots presented in the book are contextualised and broad enough to stand in for an entire segment of the Middle Ages.



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We all know the conventional interpretation of the medieval period: the high culture of the Antiquity was destroyed by barbarian invasions, harsh religious doctrines stifled any progress, science was close to non-existent, superstition ruled everyday life, and there was war, underpopulation, and people suffered under ruthless rulers. It is against this backdrop that the medievalists have to defend their discipline. In contrast to the above narrative, Fried's *The Middle Ages* is an account of a period in which new constellations of political power (proto-states) appeared and the first practices of 'international' relations were laid, the complexity of societies grew, science and art flourished, and increasing rationalisation and secularisation of thinking took place. The Middle Ages are seen as a period that introduced scientific scepticism, experimentation, and an analytical way of analysing nature, based first and foremost on logic rather than superstition. Social and political relations are seen as having undergone significant proto-modern shifts with peasant unrests signalling a new growing force, the middle classes and city dwellers acquiring more power and becoming increasingly emancipated, increasing professionalization leading to creation of new elites, and the ensuing redistribution of power and money. And, in terms of religious power, this was a period of radical heresies, internal transformations within the Church, schisms, challenges to papal authority, and conflicts between secular and religious leaders, all challenging the conventional image of a monolithic religious order and its suffocating grip.

Instead of being presented as conservative and parochial, medieval individuals are presented as lively and inquisitive, ready to absorb new knowledge whatever its origin: Greek, Roman, Byzantine, or Arabic. That,

blended with the culture and science of Latin Christendom, produced a peculiar union which has served as the basis of European life, thinking, and culture ever since. The book intricately traces these influences and the channels through which they arrived in order to find out how ideas and systems of thought that we now consider quintessentially modern European, developed. The author thus also follows the invention of modern European science and of proto-globalisation, whence people, goods, and ideas began travelling, and first adventurers travelled to lands way beyond Europe. Moreover, the medieval period is credited for providing the origins for entrepreneurship, finance, capital, and international trade, thus defining the future trajectory of economic development. And, absolutely contrary to the prevailing narrative, the Middle Ages are also presented as a period in which freedoms – political, social but also freedom of consciousness – were born through introduction of free will, the development of a new class – the burgher – and as a result of struggles between secular and religious authorities. In all of that, one cannot fail to see the medieval period as a fundamentally creative one, a period that defies simplistic classifications coined by later epochs.

As the author himself notices, “[t]he concept of “rebirth” has as its premise that of “demise””. That has, perhaps, been the only crucial flaw of the Middle Ages: unfortunately occupying a temporal span immediately preceding the Renaissance with its renewed emphasis on the Antiquity. This is certainly not the first book to tackle established conventions but certainly one of the best. Johannes Fried’s *The Middle Ages* is an absolute must read for anybody with an interest in the Middle Ages and caters for all backgrounds and levels of previous knowledge.

Ignas Kalpokas is a PhD student in Politics at the University of Nottingham, working on a dissertation on Baruch Spinoza, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Schmitt. He holds his Masters degree in Social and Political Critical Theory and Bachelors degree in Politics from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania). He has also worked on various educational projects and initiatives. Ignas’ research interests lie in the investigation of interrelated concepts of sovereignty, the state, and the political as well as the formation and maintenance of (national) identities. In addition, his research also involves history, literature, and international relations theory. His preferred theoretical framework is mostly Continental philosophy. [Read more reviews by Ignas.](#)