

**Michael Borgolte, Globalgeschichte des Mittelalters, München (C. H. Beck) 2023, 128 S. (C. H. Beck Wissen, 2948), ISBN 978-3-406-80377-2, EUR 12,00.**

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Writing a book about the interconnected history of three continents over a period of 1000 years is anything but an easy task. If the narrative has to get by without detailed references on just about 115 pages while staying both coherent and appealing to specialists and non-specialists alike, it becomes an almost impossible endeavour, even for experts in the field of global history. Having authored an impressive number of pertinent publications over the past decades, Michael Borgolte can certainly be considered one of those experts. As recently as 2022, he published a comprehensive 1000-page book on the »Welten des Mittelalters« which has received many favourable reactions both from experts and the interested public<sup>1</sup>.

His latest book takes up the central conceptual traits of its predecessor (cf. p. 10) but had to overcome the tremendous challenge of condensing the narrative to the compact format of the C. H. Beck »Wissen« series outlined above. Borgolte focuses on »Eufrasia« (p. 9), the »tricontinental world« (»trikontinentale Welt«) between Asia, Africa, and Europe (section I, p. 11–106), while the Americas and Oceania are dealt with only on the sidelines (section II, p. 107–114). While this pragmatic decision inherently bears the potential of overemphasizing one world region against the other, the author can justify it by pointing out that both parts of the globe remained almost completely isolated from each other until just before 1500, a time often conceived as a transition phase between what is generally known as the »medieval« and the »early modern« periods (p. 9). Since Borgolte is a renowned specialist of medieval history rather than of pre-Columbian archaeology, it is absolutely plausible to focus on Eufrasia as his main area of expertise.

In order to demonstrate how the three continents were interconnected through a »dense and multidimensional network of relations« (»dichtes und mehrdimensionales Beziehungsgeflecht«, p. 9), the author makes use of the concept of »crossing boundaries« (»Grenzüberschreitungen«). The first and bigger part of section I (p. 13–82) is dedicated to the connection between religion and the rise and fall of polities, his prime examples being the well-studied processes of Christian and Muslim expansion. Chapter I.3 (p. 53–62) then presents Judaism as the only major



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<sup>1</sup> Michael Borgolte, Die Welten des Mittelalters. Globalgeschichte eines Jahrtausends, Munich 2022. Cf. e.g. the review by David Bachrach, in: Francia-Recensio 2022/2, DOI: [10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89138](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89138).

monotheistic religion which did not stimulate the formation of concrete polities but rather developed a »transcontinental network without a state« (»Transkontinentales Netzwerk ohne Staat«). The last two chapters (p. 62–82) switch the perspective to South and East Asia, where Buddhism became a »pan-Asiatic« religion although religious beliefs were not necessarily mutually exclusive but often a question of representation in different social contexts. The second part of section I (p. 82–106) then focuses on long-distance trade as another form of crossing boundaries. Here, the author changes his narrative style from a geographical to a chronological approach, dividing the subchapters not into artificially clear-cut phases but rather into an early, middle, and late period, thus living up to his critical view on artificial and Eurocentric periodization models (p. 7 f.).

Before presenting his outline on the history of the Americas and Oceania, Borgolte again underlines the difficulties in comparing this world region to tricontinental Eufrosia, focusing on two main points: Firstly, the Americas and Oceania comprised a multitude of individual worlds, many not interconnected but isolated from each other through vast geographical distances. Secondly, these worlds can be studied almost exclusively through archaeological sources and ethnographical observations whereas written sources are virtually non-existent (p. 107).

In the concluding chapter (p. 115–122), Borgolte aims at evaluating »the contribution of the medieval millennium to globalization in contrast to preceding periods« (p. 10). Although this period saw human migration reaching the most remote parts of the globe in Polynesia, Oceania and the Americas remained more or less isolated worlds (p. 115). In contrast, the tricontinental world of Eufrosia was able to connect to antique traditions and infrastructures of cultural exchange (p. 115 f.) The borders set by the Roman Empire were now gradually expanded, the main driving factor being the rise of the monotheistic religions: Christianity integrated Northern and Eastern Europe in its existing network which also connected to the Mediterranean world (p. 115 f.). Around the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, the expansion of Islam not only integrated the northern parts of Africa into the system (p. 116), but also opened up landward connections to the Far East. In this part of the world, both monotheistic faiths were ultimately unsuccessful in prevailing over the local religions (p. 116), which in turn were unable or not inclined to establish themselves permanently in the Islamicate West and beyond (p. 117 f.). For Judaism, the author asserts that the medieval period had not been a »period of significant border crossing« (»keine Periode bedeutender Grenzüberschreitungen«, p. 117). The influence of Jewish trade on globalization should likewise not be overestimated given the small demographic percentage of Jews in all parts of Eufrosia. Besides expansion and polity building, for which both nomadic and sedentary groups in East and West could connect to antique conceptions of world domination (p. 118 f.), Borgolte identifies long-distance trade as the »most outstanding« (»herausragendster«, p. 119) factor for integration.



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On this field, too, the participants could build on existing antique infrastructures such as the silk roads, which were now gradually expanded under the influence of urbanization (p. 121 f.), but time and again blocked as a consequence of politics and polity building in certain regions (p. 119 f.). Despite the technical limitations of navigation, waterways and especially seas functioned as another theatre of globalization through trade, with the »Indo-Islamic world«, Eastern Asia, and the Christian-dominated Mediterranean forming their own, only loosely connected systems (p. 120 f.).

After having worked through the book, which is rounded off by a list of standard works on the topic, a necessarily reduced but well composed index, and two exemplary maps on trade routes, the reader is left with a very positive impression. Michael Borgolte has mastered the challenge of presenting 1000 years of interconnected history between three continents in a both concise and vividly written narrative. He demands his readers to digest a multitude of interrelated events and processes but ultimately rewards them with manifold insights into the colourful, complex, and intertwined world of Eufrosia's three continents.



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