

Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Welches Jahrtausend brauchen wir? Zum Für und Wider des »Mittelalters« als Epoche, Göttingen (Wallstein) 2024, 79 S. (Das mittelalterliche Jahrtausend, 11), ISBN 978-3-8353-5683-2, DOI [10.5771/9783835386969](https://doi.org/10.5771/9783835386969), EUR 16,00.

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In this short book, Ludolf Kuchenbuch faces the problem of what the »Middle Ages« actually consist of or should consist of. Kuchenbuch is one of the most innovative and original medievalists writing in German and has over fifty years of experience behind him as a historian; if anyone can say something useful and helpful, it should be him, and he does so very effectively. His method is simple here: he sets out what a wide range of other medievalists have argued, in German, French and English, and then adds his own views at the end (67–77, a chapter called »Mein Votum«).

The problems here are well known. Is the »Middle Ages« nothing other than a random container, consisting of the thousand years between 500 and 1500 (approximately), so simply a convenient label for a very heterogeneous period of time? Or does it have a real content, something which marks the period out? If it has a real content, is it one which fits into that chronological time-frame, or should we, instead, use a different one – as with the numerous historians who see the defining period as being not medieval, but, rather, »pre-modern« (or »alteuropäisch«, 20), and extend the dates up to the Enlightenment? (We might replace the latter with the French revolution, or the industrial revolution; very broadly, these are in turn German, French and British choices, with exceptions obviously; but all of them put the *Wende* sometime in the later eighteenth century, and not in the early sixteenth). Or, alternatively, is the concept so inescapably Eurocentric, focussed on an imagined »middle« between Antiquity and the Modern, however defined, that we need to abandon it, given the wider understanding we Europeans now have, or should have (non-Europeans always had it) of the highly differing patterns and phases of development of the other regions of the world?

This is a problematic which every medievalist has at least a vague opinion about, but not all of them have really thought about it in detail. As History is possibly the least theoretically aware discipline of all, we tend, only too often, to confront the issues which interest us most without being too worried about wider framings. Conversely, those who have thought about it will have their own firm views and will simply disagree with those of others. In a sense, this book is above all directed at the first group; it presents so many different views about what the Middle Ages »really« were that it might – I hope! – show even the most local-



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minded historian that there is intense discussion about what the parameters of her and his discipline actually are. And, without doubt, students will benefit hugely from it as well. But, writing as someone who has indeed thought about what the Middle Ages are and what the term might usefully mean (Kuchenbuch has in fact included me among his forty-odd historians who have a view about it), I would not say that the exposure here to what others have thought about it, most well-known to me, some not, has changed my mind – although it has, on the other hand, certainly allowed me to see whom I agree with and whom I do not (I find myself closer to Michael Borgolte than to others, I think). But, anyway, there is no point in a review of this kind in spending too much time deploring the to-me mistaken views of other people. (Although I can at least lament the fact that there are still people who see the European Middle Ages as marked by some type of real and special-to-Europe uniformity, generally religious. That, at least, makes no sense to me; nor does the preoccupation which others have with the transformative nature of »modernity«, which seems to me a myth in most of its forms). What is, instead, very clear indeed from the admirable discussions in this book is that there is no settled view, and now even less than there ever was, about what the »medieval« period is and what its parameters should be. This to me is both a good thing and an inescapable one: differences of view are always good, whether one agrees or not; moreover, no-one has the power (and still less the right) to police the terminology of others.

Kuchenbuch's own view is, as noted earlier, set out at the end. I wish he had given himself more space there; but at least he is very lucid, as he always is. His starting point, »keine Position ist harmlos« (67), is crucial. He has decided, now, that the »Middle Ages« is no longer a useful concept. Although I will myself continue to use the word »medieval« as a convenient chronological marker – and will, in all probability, never find myself fully at ease in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which Kuchenbuch, along with others, now sees as part of a single period with those going before them – I recognise Kuchenbuch's criticisms of the concept and its periodisation. His comments on the dangers of any periodisation or any labelling, however – including decades and centuries – make me feel that making one's own choice of one's own parameters is important, while knowing, precisely, that none of them are »harmlos«. Kuchenbuch stresses (72) that what matters is not one's choice of categories, but the substance of what one is seeking to characterise. His choices are not entirely mine here, when it comes down to detail, but I applaud his framing of his own. And, although I would prefer to remain with the perspective of the people whom I am studying (»die Toten«), rather than decentre them by focussing on how much they contributed – or failed (a word Kuchenbuch does not use) to contribute – to the Modern world, I fully recognise, together with the author in his final words, that our interpretative frames are inescapably linked to »die unstete Gegenwart. Damit haben die Toten nichts zu tun«.



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