

John Aberth, Contesting the Middle Ages. Debates that are Changing our Narrative of Medieval History, London (Routledge) 2018, XVIII–344 p., 3 fig., 4 maps, ISBN 978-0-415-72929-1, GBP 105,00.

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After being asked by Routledge Press to write a new textbook for western medieval history, John Aberth, an independent scholar and specialist in the history of the Black Death, chose instead to write a text that he describes as focused on topics that are the subject of »recent and raging« historiographical debates. The result is a volume, divided into nine chapters of unequal length that focus on topics identified by Aberth as fitting the schema of both recent and »raging«.

By far the longest of these chapters is the eighth, which addresses the Black Death. Aberth's treatment of the historiography concerning this topic focuses on three main areas: the identity of the disease that caused the Black Death, the demographic impact of the Black Death, and the socio-economic impact of the Black Death. The first section of this chapter consists largely of attacking straw men for the purpose of creating a »raging« debate, in that almost no scholar has argued in the last decade that the Black Death was caused by anything other than *Yersinia pestis*, that is the plague. The second part of this chapter makes the maximalist case for the mortality rates of the Black Death, but is hampered by the author's unwillingness or inability to consult scholarly works in languages other than English, and his almost myopic focus on England. The third part of the chapter considers a variety of important questions relating to the socio-economic impact of the plague, including the development of higher real wages for working people, freer markets in goods and labor, and the end of serfdom. Once again, however, the author's decisions to ignore non-Anglophone scholarship, and to focus almost entirely on England means that his discussion of the historiographical debates on these issues, and his own conclusions have limited value for specialists, but do address a number of topics that may be of interest to a lay audience.

Unfortunately, the remainder of the volume is plagued by the same problems as chapter eight, without the saving grace of the author's own research expertise. The chapters on the End of the Roman Empire, Viking Invasions, Crusades, Persecution of Minorities, Sexuality, Women in Medieval Society, Intellectual and Environmental History, and historical periodization range from textbook level plabum, with the names of some historians adduced to give a flavor of scholarly effort, to significant distortions of both the historiography and history being treated. One simply cannot begin to address the historiography of these topics by examining Anglophone scholarship alone, even if one were to discuss scholarship in this language in its entirety.



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However, in those areas that I know best, including the crusades, the Vikings, and the late antique transition to the medieval West, Aberth's treatment of the Anglophone scholarship is both incomplete and idiosyncratic. The errors of omission are far too many to address in a review. It is the author's numerous sins of commission that are even more egregious. For example, Aberth's reference to »some typically medieval institutions, such as feudalism and manorialism« (p. 4) without a hint that he is aware of Susan Reynold's »Fiefs and Vassals«, or the sea change in our understanding of the nature of the post-Roman world that she wrought is simply unforgivable in a book that purports to address raging debates about the nature of the medieval world.

There are a small handful of cases in which Aberth provides his readers with a historiographical discussion that is illuminating, such as his treatment of the debate regarding the purpose and evidentiary value of the Jewish chronicles of the First Crusade. However, these relatively minor positive points cannot salvage this book. Potential readers would be much better served by seeking truly historiographical articles by authors well versed in the fields about which they are writing.



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