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Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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Erik Hermans (ed.), A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages, Leeds (Arc Humanities Press) 2020, X–564 p., 17 maps (Arc Companions), ISBN 978-1-94240175-9, GBP 145,00.

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Although economic historians, particularly those with an archaeological bent, have long recognized the interconnectivity of the numerous economic zones of the pre-modern world, the last decade has seen a surge of scholarly interest in what has become known as global history of pre-modern societies. Global history, and its ostensibly more inter-disciplinary cousin, global studies, are predicated on the examination of cross-cultural and inter-regional communications, broadly understood, on a world-wide scale. The problem inherent in such scholarly inquiry, dating back to the first efforts at »world history« in the 1960s, is the difficulty that any single scholar faces in gaining command of either the sources or the scholarship in two or more highly distinct fields.

The present volume, therefore, is exceptionally welcome in that it brings together research by scholars with specialities in a very wide range of geo-political contexts and academic traditions. The decision by Erik Hermans, the editor of this volume, to limit its scope to the relatively brief period of c. 600 AD to c. 900 AD, has also proven quite fortuitous in that many of the essays provide overlapping coverage of the same questions and phenomena, but from different geo-political perspectives.

The volume begins with a brief introduction by Hermans that lays out the parameters of the text, with the specific goal of integrating macro- and micro-historical narratives through an examination of the inter-connectivity of the world in the period between the eruption of the volcano at Ilopango in 536 and the first voyage of Scandinavians to North American in the late 10th century. In this context, Hermans offers a reasonable justification for using the specifically western European concept of »Early Middle Ages« to describe a global history, explaining the dominance of »medieval« terminology in many non-western fields. The volume is then divided into two unequal parts. The first of these consists of fifteen essays that treat, in turn, East Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, Japan, Korea, China, Tibet, Inner Asia, West Asia, Byzantium, Northeast Africa, Saharan and West Africa, Western Europe, and Mesoamerica. Given the enormous geographical scope of this section of the book, the absence of an essay on the Baltic-Scandinavia region or any sustained treatment of the Slavic world, in its own right rather than as an adjunct to the Byzantine Empire, are important missed opportunities.

The second, much shorter section of the book is entitled Processes and includes four essays. These are focused, respectively, on

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Trade and Commerce, Migration, Climate and Disease, and finally Intellectual Connectivity. Many readers will miss here a detailed treatment of warfare, and particularly the matrix of questions relating to military organization, which is mentioned periodically throughout the volume, but does not receive sustained attention in any of the essays focused on specific regions.

Although Hermans does not explain in his introduction the instructions given to the individual contributors regarding the parameters for their essays, one of the exceptionally valuable aspects of most of the studies in section one is a detailed discussion of the source materials that are available for the study of specific kinds of questions in each region. As Glenn Summerhayes makes clear in his discussion of Oceania, for example, the absence of any written sources of information in the period 600–900 imposes significant constraints on the kinds of questions that scholars can ask or answer. The study of archaeological remains, which is still in its infancy in the region of Oceania, provides some glimpses of the movement of populations, and permits some understanding of technological development. Summerhayes suggests that these limited material sources are complemented by linguistic studies that purportedly show population movements as well. By contrast, Tineke D'Haeseleer's study of China under the Tang dynasty (618–904) illuminates not only the voluminous written and archaeological sources from within China, itself, but also the extensive source materials from outside China that illuminate its connections throughout Asia, the Near East, Byzantium, and even, indirectly, with Western Europe.

In contrast to the consistent decision by the authors of the regional studies to discuss the issue of sources, the main focus of the individual studies varies quite considerably. For example, the chapters by D'Haeseleer on China, Richard McBride on Korea, Michael Drompp on Inner Asia, and to a large extent Lewis Doney on Tibet and Heather Mckillop on Mesoamerica, offer political narratives. The chapters by John Whitmore on Southeast Asia, Mark Horton on East Africa, Khodadad Rezakhani on West Asia, Michael Decker on Byzantium, Sonja Magnavita on Sahara and West Africa, and Jennifer Davis on Western Europe offer a much greater focus on economic history, albeit economic histories that are more or less closely intertwined with political narratives.

Other chapters are more *sui generis*. Kenneth Hall's chapter on South Asia, for example, attempts to weave together religious, political, cultural and economic history. Ross Bender's study of Japan, after offering a brief political introduction, including relations with the Korean Peninsula and Tang China, turns to a focused treatment of the peripatetic imperial court. George Hatke's examination of Northeast Africa offers a comparative analysis of the cultural development of Nubia and Ethiopia.

The volume lacks a summarizing conclusion, and it appears that the four essays in the second part of the volume were intended, in part, to serve this function. The essay that goes the furthest in

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this direction is Richard Smith's lengthy essay, which presents Tang China and the Ummayad/Abbasid Caliphate as the two poles of a pan-Eurasian trading system that enjoyed a golden age in the seventh through the ninth centuries. Smith certainly makes a good case for the exceptional importance of trade between these two densely populated regions of the »early medieval« world. However, specialists focused on the Baltic littoral, Scandinavia, western Europe, as well as Egypt, may find Smith's rather dismissive treatment of the economic history of these regions somewhat off-putting.

The chapter on Migration by Johannes Preiser-Kappeler offers a briefer, yet still valuable assessment of the movement of peoples across the Eurasian landmass through a variety of vectors, including military resettlement, merchant colonies, missionaries, refugees, deportees, and slaves. The essay by Peter Sarris on the impact of climatic change and disease on demography and economic development offers some interesting observations, including identifying the economic impact of climate forcing events, such as the eruption of Ilopango in 536. However, this study does not offer the same kind of integrative structure as the previous two. Similarly, the final essay by Hermans offers a number of interesting insights, particularly regarding the importance of religious ecumenes, which straddled cultural frontiers, in facilitating the transmission of texts and ideas. But it also lacks a truly integrative function.

Overall, this is an exceptionally valuable volume, which will be of use to scholars across a wide sweep of fields. Many of the individual essays also will provide an easily accessible entrée to the political histories of non-western societies to graduate and even undergraduate students. There are some ways, however, that a revised edition of this text could be improved. These would be to provide a thorough synthesis of the main points of the individual essays that provides suggestions for future, inter-regional investigations, and a more systematic thematic approach within the individual essays that would allow readers to compare apples to apples with regard to the individual regions.

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