

Michael Borgolte, Die Welten des Mittelalters. Globalgeschichte eines Jahrtausends, München (C. H. Beck) 2022, 1200 S., ISBN 978-3-406-78446-0, EUR 48,00.

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The study of world or global history, although dating back more than a half-century, has gained increasing importance over the past two decades. Not surprisingly, scholarly study of global history, with its focus on cross-cultural and inter-regional interactions, began with the contemporary world because of the obvious interconnectivities made possible by modern transportation and communication technologies. More recently, specialists in pre-modern history have argued that the same factors that animate modern global history, such as inter-regional communications, long-distance trade, large-scale population movements, and intercontinental empires, also were important in earlier periods as well. The result has been an increasing number of publications as well as research projects focused on the global Middle Ages¹. It is in this context that Michael Borgolte, professor emeritus of medieval European history at the Humboldt University in Berlin, has written a monumental history of the »Worlds of the Middle Ages«, with the subtitle of a »Global History of a Millennium«.

Borgolte begins his 1100-page tome, as is *de rigueur* for medieval global histories, by discussing what medieval means in a global context. As is well-known, the entire concept of a »Middle Age« was concocted by 14th-century Italian humanists, and particularly by the Florentine scholar Petrarch (1304–1374), to exalt his own city of Florence at the expense of earlier centuries, which supposedly were marked by »Germanic« degradation of the glorious Roman past. This model of »barbarian« disruptions of the classical order long since has been abandoned by specialists in Western »medieval« history, but the influence of Western scholarship has led to the adoption of the vocabulary of medievalism to discuss cultures around the world. Borgolte recognizes and seeks to bridge this dichotomy between the actual history of Europe and the historiography of medievalism in numerous historical traditions, particularly in Asia. Borgolte's solution, which works to an extent, is to use his relatively brief introduction to recast medievalism as a response to the collapse of imperial rule. This model fits not only

¹ See, for example, Catherine Holmes, Naomi Standon, Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages, in: Ead. (ed.), *The Global Middle Ages*, Oxford 2018 (Past & Present, 238) p. 1–44; Erik Hermans (ed.) *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, Leeds 2020; Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, Cambridge 2021.



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western Europe but also post-Gupta India, post-Sasanian western Asia, and post-Han China, although the latter case is stretched to accommodate the initial collapse of centralized imperial rule in China during the second century A.D. More problematic in this context is the Byzantine Empire, which is marked by enormous continuity, not as a successor of the Roman Empire but rather as the Roman Empire *tout court*.

A second major challenge that Borgolte faces, as do all scholars of the pre-modern period, is the uneven source material available for the different regions of the world. A concomitant problem, which Borgolte also addresses, is the challenge of treating in depth areas outside one's own expertise. His solution to these challenges is evident in the overall structure of the text, which is divided into three sections after the introduction. The first of these sections, titled »Realities of the Stranger« is just 44 pages, and covers all of the Americas, and the Pacific Islands, inclusive of Australia.

The vast majority of the text, comprising section three of the book, is focused on the mega-continent, denoted by Borgolte as »Eufrasia«, which encompasses the continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia. This third section is divided into four chapters. The first of these chapters, which is quite brief, serves a similar function as the previous section of the book, by explaining that there are insufficient source materials from Sub-Saharan Africa and the arctic fringe of Europe and Asia to include a detailed treatment of these regions in the rest of the text.

In the second chapter of section three Borgolte returns to the theme of empire that he addressed in the introduction. This lengthy chapter, of some 200 pages, titled »Empires as Regions of Communication«, is divided geographically into three parts that treat, in turn, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Borgolte further subdivides each of these three continents geographically, e.g. the section on Asia treats in turn the lands of the erstwhile Sasanian Empire, the Indian subcontinent, the Chinese Empire, Korea and Japan, and Indo-China. The dominant focus in this chapter is on political history, although some attention is given to population movements, such as the so-called Hunnic storm, which saw the migration-*cum*-invasion of the western Eurasian steppes as well as the Balkans by various peoples that were driven out of the eastern Eurasian steppes. A curious element of Borgolte's political surveys is that in a text ostensibly focused on the medieval millennium, he uses the heuristic device of examining empires to begin his discussion much earlier. Thus, for example, in his treatment of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, Borgolte begins in the third millennium B.C., and with respect to India begins in the early second millennium B.C.

In chapter three of the third section, titled »Relationship Networks of Religions«, Borgolte starts with the observation that religious connections play a central role in building both regional and inter-regional connections. This chapter, which is almost 300 pages, is divided into four parts. In the first and briefest of these, titled »At



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the Boundaries of the »People« and the Land«, Borgolte surveys the religious and social roles of Shintoism in Japan and Jainism in India. Part two, »In the Largest of the Continents«, provides overviews of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, before treating in rather more depth Buddhism, with a focus on the expansion of this religion over broad swathes of Asia. He concludes this part of the chapter with a brief survey of Confucianism and Daoism in China. The third part of the chapter, titled »The Tri-Continental World«, begins with a lengthy treatment of Judaism, and particularly the broad diffusion of Jews throughout Eufrosia. Borgolte then turns to a discussion of the three realms of Christianity, in the East, in the West, and the Byzantine-Orthodox world. After a brief discussion of Manichaeism as a kind of dead-end in creating a universal religion, Borgolte concludes this section with a surprisingly brief discussion of Islam. The final brief part of this chapter, which serves as a conclusion of sorts, considers »Christians and Muslims of the Middle Ages as Pioneers of Globalization«.

In the fourth and final chapter of section three, Borgolte turns his attention to long-distance trade. This chapter, which is organized largely chronologically, examines the development of regional trading zones across Eufrosia, leading up to a true world-wide trading system in the late medieval period. In his discussion of the problem of examining long-distance trade in a period for which we lack anything resembling robust statistical data, Borgolte argues that it is more important to use qualitative information to assess the movement of goods over long distances, rather than trying in vain to quantify this trade. He also argues that for the purposes of understanding globalization, it is less important whether goods were moved for purely economic reasons, as contrasted with diplomatic gifts or plunder, than it is to see the networks through which goods were moved. In this chapter, more so than earlier in the text, Borgolte also addresses source questions in considerable detail, emphasizing the ever-increasing role that archaeology plays in understanding long-distance trade in pre-modern periods. In this context, Borgolte intervenes in an important debate regarding the fate of long-distance trade in western Europe following the dissolution of the western half of the Roman Empire. He argues on the basis of the most recent archaeological discoveries, that there was no break in trade in western Europe between the 5th and 7th centuries, and that it is from this already solid basis that we see a significant expansion of long-distance trade from the 7th century onwards. This finding is quite at odds with the conclusion of Michael McCormick, who argued that this period saw a rapid diminution in long-distance trade reaching its nadir in the 7th century².

In the final, very brief fourth section of the text, Borgolte addresses the main points raised in sections two and three. The volume is equipped with a massive apparatus of endnotes and bibliography,



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² Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900*, Cambridge 2001.

which demonstrates the enormous range of scholarship upon which Borgolte developed his synthesis of political, religious and economic topics. The book includes thirty high resolution maps, which is a rather modest number given the enormous chronological and geographic scope of the volume, as well as a small number of images.

Overall, this text is a remarkable achievement. Borgolte has synthesized a vast body of scholarship, particularly with respect to religious history and long-distance trade, which illuminates the ways in which the peoples living during the global Middle Ages communicated beyond their home regions. The political histories of the numerous regions provide some useful context for the subsequent discussion of religious and economic matters. However, Borgolte did not make full use of the imperial paradigm as an integrative device. In large part, this is true because he eschewed almost entirely a discussion of military matters, and the role that war played in integrating regions both within and across the continents that comprised Eufrosia. In a similar vein, Borgolte has very little to say about technology and the ways in which the diffusion of technology illuminates trans-regional and global connections. But these are relatively minor quibbles with regard to a study that has succeeded admirably in illuminating two exceptionally important aspects of global history over the course of a millennium.



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