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The Body Broken: Medieval Europe 1300-1520

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The late Middle Ages are a challenging period to survey and synthesise. Any attempt to summarise their complexity, chaos, and dynamism within a restricted publisher?s word limit and at the same time provide an effective textbook for undergraduates is fraught with issues of coverage, comprehensiveness, and accessibility. Charles Briggs is to be congratulated on having taken on the challenge, in this case seeking to deal with the whole of western Europe between 1300 and 1520. Judgements on whether he has met the challenge appropriately will vary, perhaps especially among the book?s intended users.

His text comprises a short introduction, a core of ten chapters, and then a brief conclusion. The introduction frames the overall examination within the conceit of the ambiguities and implications of a society which defined itself in relation to the body of Christ ? *corpus Christi*, a body exemplified in the mass and the miracle of transubstantiation, and itself substantiated through unavoidable individual membership of the catholic Church. That body was the host fractured by the priest at the words of consecration; it was also the imagined community of the faithful, fractured by political, social, and economic differences and tensions, placed under growing strains in the aftermath of the Black Death and eventually finally shattered as a religious entity with the Reformation. It is a neat conceit, and one with which it is hard ? perhaps impossible ? not to feel some sympathy; but while it is postulated as the framing conceit of the volume, it rarely reappears thereafter until revisited in the conclusion. Instead, the ten chapters which comprise the book?s

textual body offer a broad thematic survey of the western European world, organised in four groups which deal with distinct components of the total picture.

Of those four groups, the first two each consist of three chapters, the second two contain two chapters each. Part one centres on ?Social and economic change?. Why this particular facet of Europe?s history takes precedence is not explained, but it does mean that readers are immersed in complex issues right from the start. Indeed, the initial dive is very much into the deep end, the first chapter dealing with ?The demography of disaster? and immediately throwing readers into a highly compacted analysis of the early 14th-century crisis in a section on ?Population pressure, climate and subsistence crises?. Other disastrous forces covered in this chapter include war, plague (obviously, and fairly extensively ? including a survey of the development of anti-Jewish sentiments which seems a touch out of place), and popular rebellion. The second chapter, on ?Individuals, families and communities? maintains the momentum of the first. Its lengthy introduction, on social organisation and gender in medieval society, precedes sections on ?Marriage, family and the household?, ?Individuals, social hierarchy and communities? (a brief discussion amounting to little more than half a page (p. 48))), ?The nobility?, ?Rural communities? (where, without explicitly saying so, English experience seems to provide the norms for peasant existence, despite the appearance of a broad continental commentary), and ?Urban communities?. Finally, in this part, chapter three turns to ?Trade, technology and exploration?. After its short introduction, the problematics of crisis are again addressed, locating the century from c.1350 to c.1450 between two periods of commercial expansion. ?Trade and technology? are then considered at some length; the briefer examination of ?exploration? deals with the slow penetration of the Atlantic and the move into Africa with an unavoidable culmination in Columbus.

Part two, on ?Political developments?, opens with a chapter which provides basic orientation in ?The theory and ideology of government?. This deals mainly with the intellectual aspects of politics, the thought rather than the practice ? although the conflict between thought and practice is acknowledged. Only after reading through does it strike home that the focus is almost exclusively on monarchical government: the alternative political thought associated with communalism and ?bottom-up? politics ? Walter Ullmann?s ?ascending concept of government? ? is not really addressed. Subject to this limitation, the chapter?s initial sections survey ?Intellectuals and the ?languages? of political theory?, the contexts in which ?The intellectuals confront political reality? (and therefore in which they were forced or chose to declare themselves ? in the quarrels of Philip IV against Boniface VIII, and in the writings of Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham), and the task assumed by intellectuals of ?Informing the prince: works of instruction and advice? ? a section which at one point descends into a somewhat daunting list of mirrors for princes drawn from across Europe. Beyond the realms of the intellect, the chapter also considers the requirements of ?Performing and displaying the state?. Only here does ?ideology? explicitly creep in (p. 106), perhaps somewhat late, manifested through the ?propaganda? of royal and royalist orations, processions, and courts and court society. These themes, with their inclusion of patronage of art and architecture, are expanded to include some non-royalist elements ? one paragraph (pp. 113?5 ? an illustration intervenes) squeezes in comment on the use of frescoes and statues to reinforce urban values. The last of this part?s three chapters considers ?The lineaments and limits of state power?. Here, possibly at long last, Briggs provides a structural depiction of the political world, and some basic political narrative. The initial pages raise the fundamental issue of whether the ?states? of this period were indeed states, and the spectre of nations, to challenge boundaries between ?medieval? and ?modern?. It then passes to deal in two sections with ?The structures of rule?, first in monarchic polities, and then in city-states. The former offers a whistle-stop survey of the core elements: administration, taxation, justice; the latter is rather more sketchy and unfocussed ? save for being of necessity about northern Italy. A third section turns to ?Relationships of rule: courts, councils, and patronage?. The final, and lengthiest, section of the chapter (pp. 131?51, including one spread of map and several lists of rulers) deals with ?The fall (and rise) of princes?. This works through compressed narratives of the histories of (in turn) the British Isles (pp. 134?9, mostly about England), France and Burgundy (pp. 139?43), the Iberian kingdoms (pp. 143?6), and Italy and the Empire (pp. 146?51). The surveys are unavoidably sketchy, statements rather than analyses.

The final chapter here deals with ?War, chivalry and crusading?, in that order. War itself is clearly linked to

politics, and can readily and validly be brought under the banner of ?Political developments?: here the commentary deals with it as an aspect of the state. The ambiguity of chivalry makes it rather less obviously a matter of politics: as a social and cultural phenomenon it had practical impact on combatants? behaviour (at least, that of the knights), and is an element of warfare; but its direct relevance to the practicalities of political structures is more uncertain. The more literary and cultural aspects of chivalry would perhaps have been better dealt with elsewhere. Crusading also fits uneasily under the banner of politics, given the significance (real or merely proclaimed) of its religious and spiritual elements. Here it is integrated into the political history as the opportunity to discuss the Turkish advance into the Balkans and the fall of Constantinople, and to bring in the Baltic frontier and Christian expansion in Spain, Africa, and the Canaries.

With part three, ?Religion and devotion?, the sense of the unity of Christendom as the body of Christ might be expected to be invoked as the cohering and driving force. The title of the initial sub-section in the first of the two chapters (chapter seven: ?The bride of Christ: the institutional Church?) certainly raises that expectation ? ?Incorporating the body of Christ: theory, organisation and personnel?. To some extent the expectation is satisfied, although obliquely. The incorporation is also the process of constructing an institution: the chapter homes in on the clergy and their roles, within the church and in relation to their flocks, looks at the aftermath of the ?pastoral revolution? of the 13th century and the expectations of the religious awareness of the laity as members of the ecclesial body, and comments briefly on the religious orders and the role of theologians. This section provides the prologue to two others offering a narrative ? as ever, necessarily sketchy ? of ?The governance of the Church under the Avignon popes? and ?The Great Schism and its aftermath?. Chapter eight turns from the institutional history to the spiritual, examining ?Devotion: Catholic and dissenting beliefs and practices?. Its first three segments in turn survey ?Lay religion?, ?Sacred time and space? (which includes some comment on relics and saints), and ?Movements of devotion?. The last is a portmanteau label for a brave attempt to summarise the key elements of lay devotion in a few pages (211?26), while also bringing in massacres of Jews, Wyclif as heretic, and the origins of the witch-craze. Perhaps oddly, comment on the main ?devotional movement? of the period, the *devotio moderna*, is delayed until the chapter?s fourth and final segment, on ?Laity, clergy and reformation?. Here, given the reference to dissent in the chapter?s title, more comment on the heretical movements of the period might also be expected, but it is not provided. (There seems in fact to be no overall summary of Hussitism in the volume, although the index notes several scattered references.)

The book?s final section, part four, proclaims a focus on ?Cultural change?. Of its two chapters, the first deals with ?Schools, schooling and intellectual developments?. It surveys ?Schooling outside school?, ?Primary and secondary schools?, and (most extensively) ?Higher education?. The last extends beyond the universities to note the existence of other places of ?higher? learning, but they are merely noted. There is a brief sketch of ?intellectual developments? (pp. 254?7), which attempts to survey medieval philosophy in a couple of pages and also comments on the nature of Renaissance humanism, before turning in the concluding pages to trace the relationship between universities and external authorities. The following chapter looks at ?Language, literacy and the arts?, as usual compressing and cramming its material in. Here the sub-sections survey ?Language, literacy and literature?, ?Script and print? (including libraries), and ?Music, architecture and the visual arts?.

The text concludes with a few pages considering whether 1520 marks a transition into ?a new Europe?. Here the conceit of the introduction reappears, as Europe as Latin Christendom as the body of Christ began to face up to the challenges of confrontation with a wider non-Christian world, the inheritance of the pre-Christian world, and the release of the internal tensions which had somehow been kept under control in the preceding centuries.

This is a courageous and ambitious survey, written with verve, occasionally with a touch of asperity, and certainly carrying its reader along. The mass of material which is compressed into any one chapter is considerable; the necessary balancing act between essential (or, at least, worthwhile) information and overwhelming detail is a difficult one to strike. At times the text does overwhelm, and one has to wonder whether readers with little or no previous awareness of the period ? primarily the undergraduates for whom it is intended ? will indeed feel out of their depth, or alienated by runs of unalleviated facts.

For the main question has to be, does the book work? The cover describes it as a textbook, and ?the complete authoritative student?s guide to Europe in the later Middle Ages?. There is a certain hyperbole here, the words presumably those of the publisher rather than the author ? at least, one hopes so. This is not a portrait of the whole of Europe between 1300 and 1520: the focus is firmly on western, Catholic Europe. Of Byzantium and is travails there is little mention; Scandinavia gets very little look-in; coverage wanes towards the east and effectively ends at the Lithuanian border. It is not that the peripheries are actually ignored ? most have their index entries ? but the thematic approach means that attention focuses on the usual suspects, as exemplified in the chapter on political structures: France, Spain, England, Germany, and Italy. There are gaps and omissions. Nevertheless, Briggs does aim to cover as much as his word limit will allow, and in many respects puts on a bravura performance, delivering a torrent of information in a fluent, engaging, and occasionally caustic style. Unavoidably it is broad-brush stuff, with occasional more detailed vignettes

But again, does it work? In some respects a reviewer is not really qualified to say ? a reviewer supposedly does not need a textbook (but even for those already *au fait* with the period there is much to be gleaned from the details, and from the illustrations). The book is a good read; but how much will its intended readers actually want or need to read, and how will they read it? The thematic approach breaks with the traditional concept of a textbook, but that in itself need not deny the volume the label. The ordering of the themes is more of a challenge, especially with the relegation of the core political survey to the fifth chapter, and thus rather late into the survey. While that chapter offers sketches of the narratives of the surveyed realms, they are no more than sketches, and an overall sense of narrative is elusive both there and elsewhere. Ultimately, the book appears too advanced, too demanding, to serve as a textbook: it is not really a basic outline, but a more advanced analysis which presumes, and often assumes, the preliminary background knowledge of Europe?s evolution on which the thematic assessment can draw to reinforce its own arguments. It is perhaps a book to be used as an adjunct for a series of specific seminars (which in actuality it seems to have evolved from in the writing), not as a comfort blanket providing a foundational statement of events and debates ? although quarrying certainly brings up the latter. The issue becomes really apparent when this volume is compared, and contrasted, with what its preliminaries identify as its companion in the series of the ?Routledge History of the Middle Ages? ? Malcolm Barber?s *The Two Cities* (first published 1993, second edition 2004), on the preceding period from 1050 to 1320. That volume (admittedly rather larger) serves much more as a basic guide and support for preliminary forays into the period, providing information in easily manageable and digestible introductory chunks, and with much more narrative. Briggs?s volume will perhaps be more successful as a second stage introduction, to provoke thought and flesh out ideas once the preliminary narrative and contextual skeleton has been set in place.

The book is illustrated with 26 photographs and eight maps (all of the latter reproduced from other works); 11 ?tables? list rulers and popes and some other information; a select chronology is also supplied (not duplicating dates given in the earlier tables). There is a helpful survey of suggested further reading (pp. 302?15), which serves as a guide to the bibliography which follows.

Against its many positive elements, the volume does have two annoying features. The index is split into three, of people, places, and subjects; juggling between them can be irritating. Even more irritating is the system of referencing. Here the grouse is not that the references are in endnotes (although footnotes are far superior more user-friendly), but that the endnotes are frustratingly hybrid in character. Instead of providing a straightforward route to the source of the information offered in the text, they impose a further stage by being constructed in a kind of Harvard system ? providing author and date of publication, but no title details.

The actual source then has to be found by working through to the bibliography. This makes the process of following up the references in the text both laborious and annoying, to the point that one simply gives up. It is hard to imagine many students going to so much bother, unless they feel that they really have to.

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