

Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800

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For an outsider contemplating historiography on the early middle ages, it is a tribute to the subject's vitality that a book of over nine-hundred pages of text should claim to be less than a definitive statement and aims 'only to provide the raw material for a better synthesis to do so in the future'. The rather appealing modesty is misplaced. This is no less than a comparative study over four centuries of an area stretching from Ireland and Denmark in the north west to Palestine and Egypt in the south east. The author succeeds convincingly in gathering a vast amount of evidence while maintaining an informed critical discussion. The debate concerning how the late-classical era became the 'middle ages' is far from over, but this is a magisterial presentation of the state of play.

In analysing the period, Wickham selects four specific issues as crucial: the form of the state (especially its fiscal apparatus); the aristocracy; the peasantry; and, finally, networks of exchange, in which he includes urban life and the economy. Something of the scope of this work should now be becoming clear. After considering the historiography from Dopsch and Pirenne onwards, and providing a brief discussion of the source material available, Wickham surveys the political developments and geography of the area from the Baltic to the Red Sea. He then looks at taxation in some detail. Late-Imperial taxation was locally collected, but often redistributed over vast distances to feed Rome and Constantinople or to pay distant armies. In contrast, in the west taxation systems became localized, before often collapsing altogether, and even in the east where they survived in relatively good order, as in Byzantium or Egypt, they became centrally collected

to be distributed across regions or sub-regions. This had a considerable effect on exchange patterns, with aristocratic demand becoming a scarcely-adequate motor for largely medium-range exchange.

With the exception of the elites in France and Syria, post-Roman aristocrats were poorer than their Imperial predecessors. Their holdings were more locally focused and peasants were liable to slip from their control. A weaker state and a greater emphasis on clinging to power by force militarized the aristocracy and made war its defining passion throughout the middle ages. By contrast, peasants did comparatively well from the weakening of systematic taxation until the aristocracy was able to reimpose its power towards the end of the period. Wickham is able to show conclusively that although there were a number of ways in which peasant society was structured, the pattern of the Ile de France was an exception. It was one of the few areas where the aristocracy remained strong enough to coerce. Finally, Wickham turns to 'Networks', under which heading he includes a discussion of cities and the economy. Playing down traditional definitions of economic 'development', he emphasizes the role of bulk exchange over long distances of ceramics and grain as purely an indicator of the concentration of wealth and of how effectively elites could squeeze wealth from peasants. Paradoxically, areas with wealthier or more autonomous peasantries might well rely on humbler domestic or local production (p. 707). Long-distance trade in luxuries was so small compared with bulk exchange as to be simply irrelevant.

Wickham argues that this period is one of strong regional autonomy. In this comparative study, no one area can be taken as typical, or others neglected as exceptions. This underlies the impressive geographical sweep of the work. Wickham looks at the British Isles (except for Scotland) and Denmark as non-Roman or thinly-Romanized areas, northern and southern Gaul, the Iberian peninsula, North Africa, and Italy itself as examples of what happened to the western empire, while, Egypt, Syria- Palestine, and the Byzantine 'heartland' of Anatolia and the Aegean coast represent the east. For Wickham, what happened when the Roman empire 'broke up into its various pieces was that each piece took the surviving elements of Roman social, economic, and political structures and developed them in its own way' (p. 10).

A comparative study of these regions allows the author to liberate the discussion from simplistic conclusions while still providing a framework for understanding the period; and to a large extent the painstaking methodology justifies the length of the work. Most readers will be aware of the debate between so-called 'continuists' and 'catastrophists', regarding the transformation of the Roman world. Wickham recognizes elements of both (although to this reader he fights harder for continuity than catastrophe), but is at his most creative when he is able to sidestep the discussion—which he does at many points—by exploiting the vastness of his perspective. He takes in areas never under Roman control so that, judging from the amount of gold found in sites such as Gudme on Fyn (Denmark), there is evidence that a few Danish aristocrats did rather well from the end of the Imperial presence in the west; they were able to acquire Roman wealth either as gifts or booty. He is also able to make an authoritative analysis of the eastern Mediterranean. In Egypt, neither the state nor economic prosperity went away despite Arab invasion and conversion to Islam. Constantinople itself remained the pre-eminent city in Europe, and, after a wobbly late-seventh and eighth centuries, the Byzantine state was able to recover enough to resume collecting taxes.

On the other hand, for Britain in the fifth century 'catastrophe' is not too strong a word (p. 307), particularly in the south east which had wholeheartedly bought into the Roman cultural model of villas and cities. Again the strength of Wickham's approach is demonstrated. He suggests that a patchwork of tiny kingdoms long pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon invasions. The most thought-provoking parallel with the British experience comes not from its nearest neighbour, northern Gaul, where a strong, less Romanized aristocracy provided the means to allow many local structures of political power to continue, but from Berber North Africa. Wickham shows how the small scale familial and tribal structures there, which functioned alongside the Roman state, eventually succeeded it by a kind of hollowing-out process in the fourth and fifth centuries. The fact that non-Roman traditions were more central to political life there than in Britain meant that the process was not quite so traumatic, but, as Wickham points out, the similarities between the two areas are greater than their differences. The comparison is both striking and subtle, because it removes the need to rely on aristocracies 'surviving' the end of Roman rule, or the decisive impact of new settlers or invaders, to explain radical political change. Instead societies could become 'tribalized', sometimes so unobtrusively that

the historian might not notice the reality behind the ubiquitous Roman façade.

This analysis leads into one of the most impressive sections of the book where the author looks at the emergence of post-Roman states in northern Europe on the edge of the Roman empire. Wickham takes the examples of England, Wales, Ireland, and Denmark, creates a highly effectively synthesis of both his own and others' work, and proposes that very small-scale 'tribal' states gradually evolved into the one and two-county kingdoms of the early-seventh century (pp. 313–14). The obligations outlined around the year 700 by the West-Saxon laws of Ine are, then, a late codification of the 'superiority' kings had over large tracts of land where they took produce from followers who themselves had rights in the land, so that their payments represented an ill-defined combination of tribute, rent, and tax. In one of his most effective uses of modern parallels, the author talks about the Mafia in Palermo, with its combination of 'military' experts and the wider penumbra of the loyal and protected—as well as the exploited—from which it draws its loyalty. Extend that to the hypothetical withdrawal of not just the Italian state, but the city council as well, and one is left with the early-medieval 'tribal' state. Fifth-century British 'aristocrats' could have built loyalties from the attachments of kin, geography, and religion, but they would have ended up the poorer because they had too many responsibilities to create a collectivity (pp. 330–1). It is an appealing vision to high medievalists because the persistence of such structures, in however ghostly a form, might explain why, later, both kings and aristocrats had to spend so much time physically present in local centres of power when their economic and legal status suggests that they might safely have left the extraction of wealth and manpower to local agents.

The author makes no secret of the general intellectual underpinnings to this process, namely the transfer of resources from empire to 'feudalism', a term which Wickham uses readily for all its problematic connotations, via the rise of the aristocracy. Once we are on this familiar ground, a high medievalist can offer the following observations. First, Wickham places great emphasis on the state. He describes a 'Mediterranean world-system' fuelled, not so much by commercial enterprise, as by fiscal taxation and the enormous demand for commodities such as wine, grain, and oil generated by Rome and Constantinople. Meeting the demands of taxation either in cash or in kind was a major stimulus to agricultural production, and the collection of that tax created a class of salaried official who represented central government within the locality. The persistence of this system, albeit increasingly regionalized under the Byzantines and successor states in the eastern Mediterranean, allowed a prosperity that the west lost. However, I wonder if the contrast is quite as great as Wickham makes out. It is certainly true that the Aegean had been greatly disturbed by the demise of the Mediterranean world-system and that 'the [Byzantine] state had more resources than anyone else by far' (p. 791). But to go on to attribute the economic revival of the ninth and tenth centuries to the 'growing revival and recentralization of state structures' is seriously to underplay the economic role of new arrivals such as Bulgarians and Slavs, and the growing commercial dynamism of Byzantine provincial centres such as Thessalonika, a market for Slav traders, or Trebizond, where Byzantine merchants tapped into caravan routes from Iran. In particular, for the Byzantines Cherson on the Crimea seems to have grown up as a private enterprise where Christian and Muslim merchants could meet Khazar nomads and Rus traders from the steppes. By the earlier-ninth century, it had grown to the extent that Byzantine officials could levy a ten per cent tax on goods passing through the town—but the essential dynamism was independent of the state. The west also had new arrivals, latterly from Scandinavia. It also had emporia or wics such as Dorestad or Quentovic. While Wickham insists that these were 'standard north Frankish new towns', the sort of recurring urban development favoured by post-Roman aristocrats and later imitated by kings (pp. 687–8), it is not hard to conceive that such foundations may have been as self-generating as those further east, possibly even growing out of the disposal of local surpluses, suggesting that the difference might, in fact, simply be one of scale.

The second feature that looks surprising to the high medievalist is the comparatively small weight given to changes brought about by conversion, first to Christianity and later, in parts, to Islam. The author has promised a fully-fledged cultural history in the future in volume two of the *Penguin History of Europe*. Even at a very material level religion could bring about changes. Archaeological investigations at Whithorn, in south-west Galloway, have revealed that between 600 and 800 ceramics originating in Ireland, continental

Europe and even the Byzantine empire were brought to the site. This trade in conspicuous consumption had virtually ceased by 800. Scholars have suggested a straightforward reason for this change. The Whithorn of 600 had primarily been a secular site. Two hundred years later it was a major Christian cult centre presided over by an influential monastery. Doubtless the monks were still drawn from the aristocracy, but their priorities had turned to investing their wealth in buildings and church plate. The only discoveries from this period have been a few pieces of silver work and window glass (1).

Finally, one of the most impressive aspects of this volume is the attention paid to the vast amount of archaeological work that has taken place in the last twenty years. Analysis is built on the surviving evidence of olive and grain production, and, above all, ceramics. This may mislead, however. For example, Wickham's reading of the situation in Sbeitla (Sufetula) in North Africa, where famously an olive press encroached on one of the main routes out of town, seems optimistic. We are encouraged to believe that 'the city probably had not weakened economically by 800, or indeed 900' (p. 640), yet the fact that wealthy residents had built large fortified houses in the south east of the city, not far from where the olive press blocked the main road to the coast, at the very least suggests insecurity and isolation, and indicates that the booming olive trade does not tell the whole story. In preferring evidence for the exchange of bulk utilitarian goods over that concerning high-value luxuries, Wickham rightly states that the latter are usually 'marginal to any economic system, taken as a whole, precisely because they are restricted prestige goods' (p. 696). This is true, but they can act as a sensitive barometer of market confidence (a modern parallel might be the close attention economic forecasters pay to the volume of sales of champagne in various wine bars in the City of London), and precisely because they 'represent prestige' their availability or otherwise is often recorded in medieval sources. Again, this may be a high-medievalist's prejudice, but when bulk trade ceases I would have preferred a fuller explanation as to why this was the case, even if speculative, drawn from written sources concerning politics or luxury trade, rather than the author's frequent use of the 'catastrophe-flip'. This is a mathematical concept that is at the same time deeply human; 'the modelling of when slow change finally reaches a situation where previous patterns cannot be sustained and trends flip over into often precipitous crisis. Such patterns do not need external disasters to act as the catalyst' (p. 13). This well describes the difficulty we all have of *explaining* why something happened, in our own lives as much as in historical discourse. Yet there usually *is* a specific reason or concatenation of events to unleash the avalanche, so for historians the 'catastrophe-flip' theory of change should surely be something of a last resort.

Such minor reservations apart, this is a very fine book. Wickham writes entertainingly and informatively about national traditions of historiography, and his extensive bibliography and sensitive awareness of each tradition suggests an enviably wide cultural grasp. What is also significant is the growing realization as one reads this that the inclusion of Denmark, North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Anatolia is not an intellectual luxury, nor even just an acknowledgement of the reach of Roman imperial culture, but an integral part of the story. Moreover, the growth of scholarship in the last three decades means that both primary and secondary material are now available in unprecedented quantities. This book is not just a meaningful contribution to the history of its period, but also a challenging attempt to widen the geographical horizons of western-European historians. Wickham begins by paying homage to Dopsch and Pirenne, with this book he moves to something of the same stature.

Notes

1. W. Davies, *Whithorn and the World*, sixth Whithorn Lecture, 16 September 1997 (Whithorn, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3877>