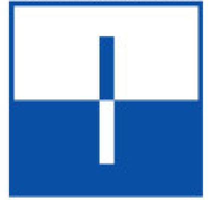
Medieval Europe by Chris Wickham (review)

Jonathan R. Lyon



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challenge the assumption that migrations by the highly educated, and the kinds of transnational involvements that they generate, are a recent phenomenon by demonstrating nineteenth-century precedents. That the book is able to deliver on these promises makes it an asset for immigration historians, as well as for those interested in comparative studies of ethnic groups, times, and geographies.

A few regrets are worth noting. The first two are methodological in nature. The collection would have benefited from a conclusion that identifies the main "complexities" of immigrant transnational involvements across time and space, which, as announced in the introduction, are evident in the individual chapters. Such a conclusion could have drawn some general lessons from these findings to help comparatively inclined researchers to pursue further investigations. Without such reflections, readers are left to their own devices in trying to find those guideposts.

Furthermore, a historically oriented sociologist (such as this reviewer) would have preferred the essays to engage more explicitly in an interdisciplinary conversation. The chapters about the "periodization of transnationalism" (not the most felicitous title)—authored by historians and a geographer—demonstrate the cognitive gains derived from paying attention to time(-ing) in analyzing immigrant transnationalism, which is certainly welcome in view of social scientists' notorious disregard of this dimension of social life. However, except for a few passing comments in Houda Asal's discussion of the vagaries of political mobilization of Canada's Arab minority, the various discussions do not consider the methodological implications of the presented evidence. Despite the different fields of interest among the contributors, *A Century of Transnationalism* largely replicates the standard faux "interdisciplinary" regimen—an assemblage of essays by representatives from different disciplines without any reflections to connect the agendas, conceptualizations, and modes of analysis with which they approach their common issues.

Finally, an important issue that is underexplored in studies of immigrant transnationalism, and not addressed in Green and Waldinger's book either, deserves attention in future publications. A volume devoted not just to the effect of states on immigrants' transnational engagements, as is this study, but also to the effect of immigrants' transnational activities on states, both those sending and those receiving, would be desirable.

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Medieval Europe. By Chris Wickham (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016) 335 pp. $35.00

Wickham, one of the leading historians of the European Middle Ages, offers his own unique perspective on the period in this lively survey,

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which squeezes an extraordinary amount of information into a modest 257 pages of text. The book treats the Middle Ages as traditionally defined—namely, the years from approximately 500 to 1500 A.D.—in a well-balanced fashion, conferring roughly equal coverage to the early, central, and late medieval periods. Geographically, the work is also even-handed. Wickham's expertise in the Italian peninsula is evident throughout the book, but this region in no way dominates the narrative. The traditional foci of medieval history surveys—England and France—are also well represented, alongside the German kingdom, Byzantium, Russia, Scandinavia, and numerous other parts of Europe.

Wickham's aim is not to provide a thorough description of events. As he explains, his study is intended to be an interpretation of the Middle Ages, not a textbook. For that reason, he does not force readers to trudge through vast thickets of dates, places, kings with Roman numerals after their names, and other confusing facts. Wickham is judicious in his use of details to add nuance to his main points without ever descending into minutiae. To his credit, no paragraph, nor indeed even a sentence, in this book feels gratuitous. The treatment of secondary scholarship is equally sensible. Wickham provides a narrative that owes a great deal to current literature; he includes occasional references to leading scholars while also giving overviews of the most important debates in the field. Yet, he avoids unnecessary namedropping or the rehashing of outdated scholarly arguments.

Because this book represents Wickham's interpretation of medieval history, rather than a textbook approach, the heart of the work is a wide-ranging narrative about political and socio-economic structures. Wickham emphasizes the significance of fiscal developments—for example, the decline of Roman taxation systems in the early Middle Ages and the appearance of new forms of tax collection in the later Middle Ages—as well as other important general trends, including urbanization, the expansion of literacy, and the changing nature of warfare. For Wickham, the period around the year 1000 is crucial to understanding the decline of older structures (including the public, political culture of Carolingian-era assemblies) and the emergence of the highly localized society of the central and late Middle Ages—though this society always maintained connections between its discrete localities. The recurring metaphor that Wickham employs for Europe after the year 1000 is a corporeal one of cellular structures and capillaries. Local communities were distinct "cells," but cultural, social, religious, economic, and political currents continuously linked them through "capillary" networks that helped to ensure the existence of a common European framework.

Most medieval historians will probably not find their general perceptions of the Middle Ages altered significantly by the account that Wickham offers. Nevertheless, his excellent, up-to-date survey provides broad interpretations that are immensely useful for anyone looking to understand the medieval period as a whole. Wickham's emphasis on political and socio-economic developments is refreshing in this day and

age when cultural and intellectual history tend to dominate narratives of the Middle Ages. It is equally refreshing to read a largely positive account of the later medieval period that effectively draws from recent scholarship in order to discredit the stubbornly persistent arguments about decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Wickham's interpretation of the European Middle Ages is one of vibrancy and dynamism, a welcome reminder of why many people find this period fascinating.

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Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe. By Daniel Lord Smail (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2016), 326 pp. $39.95

Smail is highly regarded for his detailed and evocative work on medieval Marseilles. *Legal Plunder*, which focuses primarily on how the local courts in Lucca seized the goods of debtors, demonstrates what happens when a historian changes his archives. In the shift, Smail found a rich resource in the literally thousands of fourteenth-century Lucchese records of household goods that were taken for non-payment of debts. Having done so, he then returned to his Marseilles' material from approximately the same period to re-examine his ideas about consumption and material goods. Bringing the two cities together, he offers exciting insights into what constituted household wealth, particularly for the very poor.

Smail creates a fascinating picture of the lived experience of debtors at the most precarious points in their annual credit cycles, when personal promises to repay were no longer sufficient. Promises were almost always backed by pledges, such as the rings, textiles, or silverware stored in chests or the tools found in sheds. Where there were no obvious household valuables, barrels of oil, sacks of grain, or even an oven door might suffice as eventual payment.

The use of material goods to oil the wheels of commerce in a world without sufficient coinage has been well told by, among others, Muldrew and the Material Renaissance research group.[1] But it is not only the lack of bullion that made the difference; trustworthy systems of exchange were needed to translate a cloak into cash, and then back again. Second-hand dealers filled this gap alongside regular public auctions of pawn pledges, the goods of bankrupts and rebels, or simply the furnishings of unfortunate orphaned families who needed to re-invest in their capital. These public assessments of value allowed urban citizens in such places as Lucca and Marseilles (and many other towns) to check the price of the

1 Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1998); Michelle O'Malley and Welch (eds.), *The Material Renaissance* (Manchester, 2007).