

THE INHERITANCE OF ROME

Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

The problem with many accounts of the Middle Ages is that they are not really about the Middle Ages. Authors often use the period to begin a story about the rise of modernity: moral decadence leads to political collapse and the “triumph of barbarism and religion.” In *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, Chris Wickham, Chichele Professor of Medieval History at Oxford University, rejects all such “teleological” readings and tells the story of the Early Middle Ages on its own terms.

Economic interactions drive Wickham’s account. The approach has weaknesses, but it enables him to cover all of Rome’s successor states. The popular take on this period has a Franco-Norman focus, but the history of early medieval Europe involves so much more. The Roman Empire, for instance, not only survived in the East, but also reconquered much of its old western territory. It remained a player in Italy until the fall of the Exarchate of Ravenna in 751 and the other Norman Invasion (of Sicily) in the eleventh century. The Empire was also both a trading partner with the West and its buffer against Arab advance. Thus, the continuation of the Empire is important both in itself and for understanding the Franco-Norman world. This conclusion also holds for the Arabs, Goths, Slavs, and many other groups. Wickham tells their stories and ties them together by pointing out their economic interconnections.

Wickham divides the early Middle Ages into three periods. At the beginning of the fifth century, Rome dominated Western Europe and the Mediterranean. This ended in the fifth century in the West and in the seventh century in the East, when Persian and Arab conquests left the eastern Empire in dire straits. The second period was one of “polycentric power.” By 700 the main players were Merovingian

Francia, Visigothic Spain, Lombard Italy, the Umayyad Caliphate, and a reeling Byzantine Empire (the reconfiguration brought about by the seventh-century conquests finally makes this term appropriate). The late-eighth and early-ninth century saw a third transition to a situation where three powers dominated: the Abbasid Caliphate, the Carolingians, and the Byzantine Empire. By the mid-tenth century, the first two of these were seriously weakened, while the latter was growing in strength.

These three periods were delineated by three transformations: the breakup of the Roman Empire in the West, the Arab conquest in the East, and the rise of moralizing politics (which Wickham defines as a “political program aimed at bringing a whole people... closer to salvation”) in the Carolingian world. Three further transitions marked the end of the early Middle Ages: the failure of public power in Western Europe, the growth of stable polities between the Frankish and Byzantine territories (which organized against their encroachments but imitated their style), and the breakup of the Abbasid Caliphate (which enabled the Byzantine Empire to reach the historical height of its power).

Wickham's typical concerns are on display in his account of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Reacting against older polemical accounts, some modern historians have emphasized continuities before and after 476. These historians reject the account of waves of invading “barbarians” capitalizing on the decadence of fifth-century Rome. Instead, they emphasize how the new groups' trading and living with Romans had a Romanizing effect. In fact, post-Roman leaders consciously adopted the Roman cultural and legal heritage.

Wickham agrees with this, but only up to a point. “Over and over again ‘barbarian’ armies occupied Roman provinces, which they ran in Roman ways; so nothing changed; but everything changed.” The engine for this change was the breakdown of trade networks and tax collection. Both of these favored a complex, centralized economy as well as a military hierarchy and civil bureaucracy that was independent of the local aristocracy and could subsume it. When the trade

and tax systems of the Empire broke down in the West, local landowning became the source of power and wealth. Consequently, politics became more localized as well. Ethnic identity, which is more fluid than we often admit, followed.

In the Arab conquest of the Eastern Roman Empire, the same economic dynamics worked in the opposite direction. The caliph chose not to settle his troops as a landowning aristocracy, but as garrisons in cities. The Umayyads left the Roman tax system intact to pay for this. This system promoted centralized rule, but also kept the Arabs relatively aloof from the local population. Egyptian social history, for instance, can be written with almost no reference to Arabs up to the year 800. What drove Islamicization (and Arabization) was the need for local power brokers to bridge the gap between Arab elites and native populations. The new religion (at least at this stage) spread through client-patron networks.

While Wickham's focus on economic interactions illuminates, his treatment of religion obfuscates. Socio-economic interactions are, for him, the real drivers of history. Religious figures are only interesting as participants in these. So, for instance, the ecumenical councils are important because politically prominent bishops, men like St. Athanasius or St. Cyril of Alexandria, needed a definition of God, and could whip up the masses to get it. But, somehow, we are also to believe that the very same masses did not share the outlook of their "rigorist" leaders.

The problem is that a people's convictions about ultimate realities do shape their aspirations and choices; this creates culture and drives history. The rigorists were not imitated in their asceticism, but they were influential. The masses did follow St. Cyril of Alexandria, for instance, and he did lead them in some pretty rowdy political fights, but he did this because of his prior conviction about our salvation in Christ. Similarly, the success of the moralizing style of Carolingian politics should lead us to suspect that belief shapes culture in critical ways.

Nevertheless, Wickham has provided an illuminating account of the historical period that saw the crystallization of many aspects of

Catholic life. Having set out to write a non-teleological account that lets the early Middle Ages speak for themselves, he has remarkably achieved his goal.

Peter Totleben, O.P.

Peter Totleben entered the Order of Preachers in 2006. God willing, he will be ordained to the diaconate in March 2012.