

**The Middleness of the Middle Ages: Periodizing European History****David L. Wagner**

Northern Illinois University

Periodization is an essential tool of the historian indispensable, I believe, for the historian concerned with lengthy periods of time. Thus, medievalists, most of whom are required by the exigencies of the academic world to survey the whole of the Middle Ages in their classes, cannot avoid facing the issue of periodization.

The issue arises in medieval history in both a broad and a narrow sense: broad, in that the very idea of a "middle" age lying between classical antiquity and the modern world raises questions concerning its beginning and end; and narrow, in that several distinct phases can be distinguished within that span of well over a thousand years.

Moreover, there is a quite specific reason medievalists cannot avoid the issue of periodization. The very concept that identifies their field of study arose within a tradition that was grounded in a particular theory of periodization. For, as is well known, the idea of a "middle age" arose in connection with the development of the Renaissance concept, a development that began when the Italian humanists viewed themselves as beginning a new era.<sup>1</sup> Thus, like other terms with which it was originally associated "Gothic" and "Dark Ages" the term "Middle Ages" originally had a pejorative connotation.

Perhaps by now the term has lost its negative connotation and is used in a neutral sense, as is clearly true for "Gothic." Such an occurrence is not unusual with period terms: "baroque" is another example. Yet some terms such as "Renaissance" will probably

**page 34**

never completely lose their original connotation. Even today "middle" does suggest a transitional era, its very identity thus depending on its relation to the periods that precede and follow it which seems to make the Middle Ages somehow inferior to those bracketing epochs.

The periodization of medieval history raises especially critical problems and will be the topic of this paper. Nevertheless, I shall begin by examining the periodization of Western civilization in more general terms. My aim is to base this periodization on the broadest possible criteria.

In the most general terms, the activities of men and women take place in the context of nature and society.<sup>2</sup> Man's relation to nature is perhaps most fundamental; here one can identify several basic revolutions. In addition to changes in man's relation to nature and society, man's understanding of the world in which he lives is marked by equally fundamental and revolutionary changes. Significantly, these revolutions in worldview generally parallel the revolutions in man's relation to nature a fact that can serve to identify the most basic turning points in European history. In examining these turning points, my approach will be descriptive rather than causal.

Three revolutions in man's relation to nature stand out as most basic for periodizing the human past. The Agricultural Revolution marked the transition from a food gathering and hunting society to one characterized by the cultivation of grain and the domestication of animals. Although this neo-lithic revolution lies outside the purview of the historian, I mention it because it helps to establish the nature of basic turning points. The Urban Revolution, initiated in the West in the river valleys of Mesopotamia and Egypt, marked the emergence of permanent settlements, of cities. The appearance of written documents as one consequence of this revolution signaled the beginning of history. In the period that followed the emergence of civilization, the one revolution that stands out as clearly equal in scope and importance to the Agricultural and Urban Revolutions is the Industrial Revolution which identifies the Modern

The introduction of iron is perhaps not on a par with these three revolutions from a strictly economic point of view. It would seem to represent a qualitative improvement metallurgy rather than a revolution. Yet, if one considers its social and intellectual consequence the introduction of iron clearly represented a basic turning point in history. An analysis of the revolutions in worldviews will confirm its importance for the historian.

As I have said, revolutions in worldview generally parallel revolutions in man's relation to nature. This is certainly true for the Iron Age. If one looks at Europe (i.e., excluding the ancient Near East), rationalism supplanted mythology as the way of understanding the universe.[4](#) That intellectual change accompanied economic change is equally clear in the modern period. Certainly science as well as industrialism defines the identity of the Modern Age. Finally, before I turn to the Middle Ages, let me note parenthetically that if I am correct in my assumption, a distinctive worldview would characterize the Bronze Age. What seems to have happened during this period is that anthropomorphic polytheism supplanted an earlier concept of impersonal divine forces.

The turning point that marked the end of the Age of Rationalism does not, however, exactly conform to this pattern. A revolution in worldview clearly occurred: classical rationalism gave way to a worldview oriented towards the supernatural. During the first several centuries following this change, this new orientation (which for ease of reference, I shall label an Age of Faith) took a variety of forms including Neoplatonism, the mystery religions, Gnosticism and Manicheism, and, of course, Christianity. Although this intellectual revolution was not associated with an economic revolution of the scope and nature of those previously identified, its emergence was nevertheless clearly rooted in economic and social change. Thus, for Gibbon (at least as I read him), the triumph of Christianity is explained by the decadence economic and political of the Roman Empire.

The revolutions I have discussed so far, both economic and intellectual, establish the traditional periodization into ancient, medieval, and modern. It is perhaps significant for my problem that the emergence of the Middle Ages is primarily identified by a revolution in worldview. In this it differed from the other

periods. While the origins of the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and the Modern Age were all characterized by economic revolutions that increased man's control of nature, the new medieval attitude toward the universe arose during a period of economic and social decay. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Middle Ages might seem of lesser stature to men of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment clearly; and perhaps even to some today. (Not medievalists, of course.)[5](#)

So far I have been doing history without dates. Some might even deny that it is history. But from this broad and extremely general perspective, the reality of periods seems clear. The traditional periodization is not a matter of arbitrary convenience. The men and women who lived during these epochs clearly inhabited different worlds (which for me, as I've said, includes their understanding of their worlds). I do not see how anyone can deny this.

Yet a historian will not be satisfied with an analysis in these broad terms: for historians analyze change more precisely, emphasizing exact chronology. But any attempt to give precise dates to the basic turning points does introduce an element of artificiality.[6](#) Moreover, any analysis of these broad periods will generally involve sub-periodization. And it is probably the status of sub-periods that is at issue in the debate over the reality of periods. I believe the charge of artificiality can be precluded by basing sub-periodization on general criteria, that is, by extending the approach I have adopted for the major periods.

The most obvious way to begin this second analysis would be to establish precise dates for the major turning points. But first, I shall identify one further turning point, one that I believe is as important for periodization as those identified previously.

This attempt to periodize European history has not been carried out in a vacuum. It reflects several years of teaching and study. And no one who studies the Middle Ages can be unaware of an essential turning point lying within the period. The Age of Faith emerged during a period of economic and social decline a decline, moreover, that continued

over a lengthy period. Yet at some point this decline bottomed out and Europe reached a point of stability that initiated a period of general recovery. To empha-

**page 37**

size this reversal as a turning point on a par with the others I have cited again draws attention to the middleness of the Middle Ages. This turning point divided the Middle Ages in two: the several centuries that precede it were tied to antiquity, while those that follow led more or less without interruption to the modern world.

My problem, of course, is to identify this turning point in general terms, ones that are comparable to those I have used so far. It might be possible to continue using economic criteria those adopted by Henri Pirenne and Lynn White, Jr., come to mind. The re-emergence of Mediterranean trade was the decisive factor in Europe's recovery according to Pirenne; and though rooted in the past, the technological innovations in culture cited by Lynn White only became effective with the general recovery of Europe.<sup>7</sup> These developments do not seem on a par with the Agricultural, Urban, Iron Age, or Industrial Revolutions, however, and I would prefer to identify this turning point in terms of more general criteria.

I believe an analysis of man's relation to society does provide an alternative. While I believe each age does have a characteristic form of social organization, to base periodization on this criterion would be too specific on a par with the interpretations of Pirenne and Lynn White. Demography, however, provides a more general approach to the analysis of man's relation to society. I interpret demography broadly, to include ethnic migrations; and such migrations do play a crucial role in an analysis of turning points especially at the beginning and end of the Iron Age. Nevertheless, even more important for periodization is the growth and decline in the size of population.<sup>8</sup> It is fairly clear that the decline of population that began in the late Roman Empire continued for several centuries and that the recovery of the high Middle Ages was marked by a growing population. While scholars disagree as to the exact moment of reversal, it is clear that the population was growing during the eleventh century. The year 1000 serves as a convenient if arbitrary date to mark this turning point, the beginning of a demographic revolution.<sup>9</sup>

The year 1000 is critical in any sub-periodization of the Middle Ages, and can be identified in terms of an analysis based on general criteria. Perhaps even more important, other dates critical

**page 38**

to the sub-periodization of the Middle Ages can also be based on general criteria specifically by extending the analysis of the basic turning points established so far. I shall limit my discussion to the termini of the Middle Ages. It is extremely significant that two of the most important historiographical problems of the twentieth century concern these termini. I refer, of course, to the debate on the Pirenne thesis and the so-called "Renaissance problem."

It is particularly illuminating to consider these two debates together, for they manifest a similarity that suggests an approach to the problem of sub-periodization. The essential point comes out most clearly in the "Renaissance debate" that dominated twentieth century Renaissance scholarship until World War II. The history of this debate is especially clear as it has been analyzed in detail by Wallace K. Ferguson.<sup>10</sup>

The event that would eventually precipitate the debate was the publication in 1860 of Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.<sup>11</sup> This essay (as he entitled it) marked the culmination of several centuries of interpretation, beginning with the Italian humanists themselves, that emphasized both the concept of a cultural rebirth and the periodization of European history. Although he ignored economic history, Burckhardt viewed the Italian Renaissance as a general period that lasted until the Counter-Reformation. For Burckhardt, it was a pagan age, differing markedly from the Christian Middle Ages. Burckhardt also believed that this period, which saw the "rediscovery of man and the world," ushered in the modern age.

Burckhardt's view of the Renaissance dominated historical scholarship throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, but in the early twentieth century his thesis came under attack from many sides. At issue was Burckhardt's emphasis on the discontinuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Although Ferguson devoted several chapters to a detailed analysis of the revisionists' arguments, their attack on Burckhardt can be reduced to two fundamental criticisms, both of which emphasize the continuity between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> First, they argued that features Burckhardt had used to define the Renaissance were also to be found during the Middle Ages. Although

these scholars drew attention to a number of such features the individualism of St. Francis, for example their most critical

page 39

argument rested on the identification of several previous "renaissances" Carolingian, Ottonian, and that of the Twelfth-Century using the term in a limited sense to refer to a renewed interest in classical learning. Second, they argued that those traditions Burckhardt had characterized as medieval continued well past 1300. Most significantly, they argued that the Italian humanists remained Christians and were improperly identified by Burckhardt as pagans.

Nevertheless, the revisionists merely postponed the turn from the Middle Ages to the modern world. I believe most historians who accept the revisionists' concept of a late Middle Ages the "Waning of the Middle Ages," in Huizinga's classic phrase would argue that the recovery of trans-alpine Europe in the mid-fifteenth century (or perhaps the Reformation) marked the beginning of an "early modern" age, a period that lasted to the Industrial and French Revolutions.

Ferguson's own interpretation of the Renaissance attempted to rise above the debate (in the Hegelian sense).<sup>13</sup> He accepted Burckhardt's essential thesis that the early fourteenth century marked a decisive break with the Middle Ages but viewed the Renaissance as a general period in European history, lasting to 1600. Accepting the revisionists' emphasis on the continued importance of Christianity, Ferguson rejected Burckhardt's view that the Renaissance represented the first phase of modern history, arguing instead that it was a transitional age, lying between the Middle Ages and the modern world.

I believe the important point is not the disagreement between Burckhardt and the revisionists, but rather their similarity in contrast to Ferguson. Although they differed regarding its precise date, both Burckhardt and the revisionists argued for a distinct boundary between the Middle Ages and the Modern (or early Modern) Age. Ferguson, in contrast, posited an era of transition between the two periods.

The debate on the beginning of the Middle Ages displayed a similar pattern.<sup>14</sup> Nineteenth century scholars argued that the Roman Empire came to a cataclysmic end in A.D. 476 when the last Roman emperor was deposed by the German general, Odoacer.<sup>15</sup> Pirenne rejected this interpretation, arguing that Roman institutions continued well into the seventh century. He maintained that the decisive disruption in Western history occurred only when the

page 40

expansion of Islam led to the closing of the Mediterranean. The debate provoked by this thesis centered on the issue of continuity and the date of the most appropriate boundary between the ancient and medieval worlds. It clearly recalls the debate between Burckhardt and the revisionists.

At about the same time that Pirenne began to formulate his thesis, another scholar also began to examine the appropriateness of the traditional catastrophic theory. In an interpretation that to me is strikingly similar to that of Ferguson, Ferdinand Lot argued in support of a transitional era, an interpretation encapsulated in the title of his major work, *The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*<sup>16</sup>

The adoption of the concept of a transitional era does not solve the problem of dating of course; it is still necessary to identify the termini of these transitional eras especially if they are viewed as equal in ontological status to the major periods (which is how Ferguson viewed the Renaissance). I would like to suggest a way of interpreting transitional eras that I believe minimizes the importance of identifying their termini precisely.

Let me begin by emphasizing an important fact about Lot's interpretation: he viewed the transition as a process, emphasizing the internal causes of decay. His interpretation seems to me to be essentially in accord with that of Gibbon, even though *The Decline and Fall* is often viewed as the paradigm of the traditional theory.<sup>17</sup>

Gibbon, however, also adopted a different approach to periodization, one that suggests a way to compare the two transitional eras that bracket the Middle Ages. Thus Gibbon identified a twelve hundred year period (of superstition, he would say; of faith, from a less tendentious point of view) stretching from the reign of Constantine to Martin Luther.<sup>18</sup> One might even give precise dates identifying a period from A.D. 313 to A.D. 1517. But neither the Edict of Milan

nor Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses occurred in a vacuum. Both had roots in the past; and both initiated changes that required several decades before their full import was realized.

Thus, I would suggest that each of these dates is best regarded as marking the climax of a process, one that occurs mid-way through a period.<sup>19</sup> While the concept of a climax is perhaps most suitable for eras of transition, one can also identify climaxes for the

**page 41**

other periods that I have distinguished: the coronation of Charlemagne for the period from the end of the transition to the time of recovery; the Twelfth Century Renaissance and the Investiture Struggle for the period from the beginning of recovery to the Renaissance (viewed as an age of transition); the French and Industrial Revolutions and if this approach is valid, Romanticism as well for the Modern Age.

Emphasizing the climax of a period makes it less necessary to identify its beginning and end with precise dates. Although the beginning or end of a process sometimes seems clear, these dates are often arbitrary. Nevertheless, they demand attention; and, as might be expected, I have my own dates. I accept Gibbon's view that the crisis at the end of the Age of the Antonines began Rome's decline began the period of transition in my terms.<sup>20</sup> For the end of the period, one might well follow Pirenne. Lot, too, concluded his book with the decay of the Merovingians.<sup>21</sup>

Despite my disclaimer, I do find the dating of the Renaissance a problem, and am addressing that issue elsewhere. In brief, while I accept Ferguson's date of 1300 as marking the beginning of that transitional era, I believe 1687 is preferable to 1600 at least for intellectual history if one conceives of the Renaissance as a process.

I have concentrated in this paper on problems that arise in periodizing the Middle Ages. Yet, in conclusion, I would like to consider one further turning point that is of special significance for the middleness of the Middle Ages. The idea of a middle period has always rested on its contrast with Antiquity and the Modern Age. What has given force to the concept of middleness is that the Middle Ages are held to lie between antiquity and one's own age. In other words, the Modern Age has been viewed as extending to the present. But I believe the evidence is quite clear that the Modern Age no longer exists as the frequency of terms such as "post-modern" or "post-industrial" attests.<sup>22</sup>

One can even identify the climax of the transition between the Modern Age and our own. Thus, Jan Romein has argued for the year 1900 as a watershed year (a climax, in my terms) in the era

**page 42**

from 1880 to 1914 and has cited evidence from a vast variety of areas.<sup>23</sup>

As an intellectual historian, I find the year 1905 is perhaps even more apt.<sup>24</sup> In that year Einstein first announced the special theory of relativity and also published a seminal paper on quantum physics. An *annus mirabilis* indeed. Almost simultaneously Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger*. *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared in Romein's watershed year; but, on the other hand, in 1904, William James denied the reality of consciousness in his famous essay, "Does Consciousness Exist?"<sup>25</sup>

Only when the new Age has fully taken shape will the implications concerning the middleness of the Middle Ages be clear. The term itself is perhaps permanently ingrained in the historian's vocabulary; but I doubt the same is true of its meaning. Yet one can only speculate how historians of this coming age will conceptualize the Middle Ages. For it is not yet possible to identify "what great beast ... is slouching towards Bethlehem to be born."

Notes

1. For a full discussion of this development, see Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston, 1948), chs. 1-3.
2. This rather abstract way of putting the matter reflects the overall approach I shall adopt in this paper. A recent textbook, Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Life and Society in the West: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (San Diego, 1988), p. 1, makes the same point in less abstract terms: "Human history, at its most basic level, is the history of people trying to get enough to eat and trying to find ways to get along with each other."
3. My analysis in this and the following paragraph is based on Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, with a new foreword by Professor

Grahame Clark (Baltimore, 1964). I have not, however, adopted those aspects of his theory that seem too closely identified with a Marxist analysis specifically, his use of feudalism to identify the medieval economy and his emphasis on the growth of a world market as the catalyst for the Industrial Revolution. For the sake of completeness, I should mention Childe's identification of a revolution marking man's emergence as a distinct species.

page 43

4. Some scholars have recently proposed the concept of an Axial Age to identify this new period. See S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilization* (Albany, New York, 1986). This interpretation has the advantage for me of being extremely general, but I am not presently prepared to deal with it.
5. This economic reversal does not serve as a general criterion for periodization. I shall argue below that man's relation to society can provide such a criterion.
6. I believe all historians would agree with Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the Making of European Unity* (Meridian Book: New York, 1956), p. 239: "It is impossible to draw an abrupt line of division between one period and another...."
7. Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, trans. Frank D. Halsey (Doubleday Anchor Book: Garden City, New York, 1958), pp. 55-74. Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Berkeley, 1966).
8. This may be an area in which changes in nature and society are related. The relation between changes in climate and the growth and decline of population is not yet clear, however.
9. This is not a special case. Turning points are often marked by demographic revolutions. The Urban, Iron Age, and Industrial Revolutions all led to rather rapid growth in population. See also, n. 20.
10. Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*.
11. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (many editions).
12. Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, chs. 10-11.
13. Wallace K. Ferguson, "The Interpretation of the Renaissance: Suggestions for a Synthesis," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII (1951), 483-95.
14. Pirenne's thesis is stated most fully in Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (Meridian Books: New York, 1957). Bryce Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon* (New York, 1972) gives an account of the debate. For a recent analysis from an archeological point of view, see Richard Hodges & David Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne & the Origins of Europe* (Ithaca, New York, 1983).
15. Alfons Dopsch, *The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization* (New York, 1937), ch. 1, analyzes the traditional theory, which he labels "catastrophic," going back to the Italian Humanists. See also Lyon, *Origins of the Middle Ages*, chs. 1-2.
16. Ferdinand Lot, *The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages* (Harper Torchbook: New York, 1961).
17. Bryce Lyon so argues in *The Origins of the Middle Ages*. Nevertheless, Gibbon identifies a distinct period, lasting from the age of Trajan and the Antonines to the beginning of the sixth century. See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1909), vol. I, p. xxxix.

page 44

18. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, vol. III, p. 221.
19. The life of Copernicus, whose heliocentric theory can be viewed as a climax in intellectual history, was contemporary with that of Luther.
20. If one wishes to be precise, one might argue for A.D. 167, the date of the plague that marked the beginning of the decline in population.
21. To adopt Pirenne's dating for the end of a period of transition is to remove the absolute quality it has in his theory. His interpretation de-emphasizes the importance of Christianity in the period before the seventh century.
22. This remark suggests a final criterion for periodization. In this paper I have discussed periodization using extremely general criteria based on the abstract concepts of nature, society, and worldview. Yet the essential subject matter of history remains the lives of men and women. Although history emphasizes the lives of people living in society, one way to use the concept of the individual in periodizing history is by focusing on the concept of personal identity. And one way in which people identify themselves can be used as a way of validating the periodization suggested here. H. Weisinger, "The Self-Awareness of the Renaissance as a Criterion of the Renaissance," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Literature*, XXIX (1944), 561-67, suggested that self-consciousness serves as one criteria for establishing the reality of the Renaissance. I believe such self-consciousness is generally characteristic of a new period. I have just suggested that we are now aware that we have moved into a new period of transition. Other periods as well reflect this self-awareness. Thus citing only the barest of evidence the *Epic of Gilgamesh* clearly indicated an awareness that Sumerian civilization differs from the more primitive age that preceded it; Herodotus contrasted Greek society with that of the East; the Christian fathers clearly recognized the novelty of their age; and the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns marked a consciousness of the beginning of the Modern Age.
23. Jan Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900* (Middletown, Conn., 1978).
24. I would also extend the general period to 1945. This period is not on a par with others I have identified. We are too close in time to periodize conclusively.
25. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas* (La Salle, Illinois, 1960), pp. 8-10.