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What are the 'Middle Ages'?

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In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, in the schools of northern France which were among the forerunners of the medieval university, one of the biggest intellectual debates to attract the attention of scholars was the relationship between words and things, and by extension the ways in which language does or does not capture the reality of the world that we perceive around us. This debate was no empty academic exercise. Perhaps the greatest thinker of the age, Peter Abelard, cut his intellectual teeth on the problem. At stake ultimately was the way in which people could say that they understood God, whose revelation to humankind was believed to be transmitted through the Bible, that is to say, through words. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', as the opening of the Gospel of St John declares. Does something exist independently of our having a word for it, so that words are simply after-the-fact labels that we devise in order to describe the world to one another satisfactorily? Or does a word have a more active function, actually creating the notion of the thing that it designates? The issue was never fully resolved (though Abelard characteristically believed that he had managed it) and over the years it has continued to crop up in various guises, up to and including some of the debates generated by contemporary poststructuralism. For our purposes, it is an appropriate illustration from the medieval period itself of the basic problems that surround our use of the terms 'Middle Ages' and 'medieval'. Do these labels capture a reality that actually existed, or do they force one version of reality on us at the expense of other, unvoiced, possibilities?

Periodization is an inescapable part of the study of history at all levels. It involves two related processes. First, we slice up the past into pieces of varying sizes, and then we allocate special names, labels that

help us to demarcate each slice as something distinct and unique. Periodization is embedded in the structure of school and university syllabuses, the titles of academic organizations, even job titles. We like to think that we can rise above the constraints of periodization, but no individual can hope to gain an in-depth knowledge of anything more than a tiny fraction of the totality of human experience, and so slicing history up into manageable portions makes studying the past a more focused, realistic and ultimately exciting prospect. To this extent, at least, periodization serves a positive end. On the other hand, the ways in which historians divide the past up into workable pieces have evolved in a very haphazard manner over many centuries, with the result that there is no coherent system that works equally well for all periods and all parts of the world. The problem is compounded by the fact that we use a wide variety of labels. Some are very old and hallowed by tradition irrespective of their actual validity; we shall see later that 'medieval' falls into this category. Others labels are expressions of recent trends in historical scholarship, but the problem here is that academic trends come and go, and few things date more quickly than the latest fashion. The obvious solution would be to switch the labels that are applied to the past as each new historiographical vogue comes along. But the snag then becomes that the terminology that fashion-conscious scholars devise can easily descend into an in-house code only understood by a minority of specialists in the know, something which is likely to confuse and alienate people coming to the subject from outside. At the other extreme, however, scholarly awareness of this potential problem can sometimes translate into a reluctance to jettison old labels which have clearly outlived any usefulness that they may once have possessed.

Even the most innocent-looking historical labels are never entirely neutral. The Middle Ages are a case in point. On the surface the term is simply a relational one that situates one period in between two others. Our word 'medieval' ultimately derives from the Latin *medium* = middle + *aevum* = era/age. It all looks very straightforward. But, as we shall see, it is impossible to place one fenced-off, labelled piece of time between two others without asking *why* you are doing it, and the answers to this question, even if only implicitly, will always be embedded in the terminology that comes to be applied. We have seen in Chapter 1 how the Middle Ages are a magnet for stereotypes and misconceptions in the realm of popular culture, but something broadly similar can also be true of academic discourse. Whenever historians use a historical label, they are giving it a stamp of authority and legitimacy. The label thereby



becomes a form of shorthand for the values that are associated with a particular period, as well as for the methodological approaches, substantive issues and intellectual debates that historians emphasize in order to animate discussion of their chosen piece of the past.

One way to limit the amount of baggage that a historical label can carry is to use terms which were not current at the time. The further back in time one goes, of course, the easier it becomes to introduce an element of terminological detachment as the languages that people used and their basic conceptual frameworks become more and more unlike our own. The terms 'Middle Ages' and 'medieval' are good in this respect because, obviously, they were not used in the Middle Ages themselves. If one draws on terms that were in use during the period one is studying, there is a real danger of taking people at their own estimation. An excellent example of this problem, which also has a close bearing on our understanding of 'medieval', is the use of the term 'Renaissance' in relation to changes in European civilization between about 1300 and 1600. The origins of this label lie in the language of rebirth and renovation that was used by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century intellectuals in central and northern Italy, especially in and around Florence, to describe contemporary trends in art, architecture and literature in terms of a return to the civilization of ancient Rome. The term was picked up in the nineteenth century by the influential and popular French historian Jules Michelet, and it then received its most influential endorsement in the ground-breaking work of the Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt, whose *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* appeared in 1860.

Since Burckhardt the subject has expanded enormously, and with this have come new questions of definition. Is the Renaissance best seen as a historical period or as a movement? Is it limited to elite culture, or does the term have wider applications, so that one may speak, for example, of 'Renaissance monarchy'? Was there a single point of origin, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence, or are we dealing with scattered clusters of diverse phenomena? Did the Renaissance 'happen' at different times in different places, for example in northern Europe later than in Italy? Did northern Europe have a Renaissance at all? Did the chronology of change vary for different forms of cultural expression such as architecture, poetry and music? Did women experience the Renaissance in the same ways as men? Overall, did Renaissance thinkers overestimate their closeness to classical antiquity and underestimate their debt to late medieval culture? The effect of these and many other questions has been to blur the boundaries

between medieval and Renaissance culture and to move attention away from the old certainties that flowed from Burckhardt's confidence that the Renaissance's image of itself was a indeed a fair representation of the underlying reality. This is all to the good. But the term 'Renaissance' itself is very resilient, not only in the popular consciousness but also in some scholarly circles; there are many Renaissance specialists in a range of disciplines who are uncomfortable at the thought of being rebranded early modernists or even late medievalists. As long as the concept persists, it means that any discussion of the subject that draws on it will always, by one route or another, find itself returning to the question of how much a term coined more than 600 years ago remains valid as a category of modern analysis. This is a perfectly interesting question in and of itself, but it seems a rather slender basis on which to build the comparative study of a tremendously vast, complex, variegated and thematically rich body of cultural material, some of which is indeed different and innovative compared to what we normally associate with the Middle Ages, but some of which is demonstrably a seamless continuation of late medieval civilization.

By simple virtue of its being a post-medieval invention, then, the word 'medieval' introduces a valuable element of objectivity and distance. But this is more than offset by the many negative associations that the term has accumulated since it was invented. The origins of the idea of a middle period are to be found in the writings of Renaissance intellectuals in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Perhaps the most influential was the writer Petrarch (1304–74), who is often credited with putting the darkness into the 'Dark Ages'. By the fifteenth century writers in Florence and elsewhere were beginning to talk of a 'middle era' (in Latin *media tempestas* or *media tempora*), and the prestige of avant-garde Italian ideas ensured that this notion would carry over into other parts of Europe. At this stage, the identification of a middle period was not an attempt at the sort of all-inclusive historical periodization that we often apply today. The focus of these early commentators and theorists was on high-status artistic productions, and the criteria on which they based their judgements were essentially aesthetic. In his influential *On Painting* (c.1435), for example, Leon Battista Alberti bemoaned the loss of the skills that had been practised in 'our most vigorous antique past', and set about trying to revive them for his contemporaries.

Another excellent illustration of this approach to the past is to be found in *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* published by Giorgio Vasari in 1550 (an expanded version appeared

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in 1568). Writing after 200 years of Renaissance thought and artistic effort, Vasari was attempting to build on the perspectives of writers such as Alberti by pulling together the lives of different artists into one explanatory framework. He hoped that this would create a single, coherent story of art's rise, fall, and rebirth. Tracing the emergence of art from the Creation to the ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Egypt, Israel, and especially Greece and Rome, Vasari argued that artistic standards had begun to decline in the late Roman period. The triumphal arch erected in Rome in the early fourth century AD, to mark the defeat in 312 of the main rival of the emperor Constantine (306–37), was, Vasari argued, emblematic of this deterioration. When the Germanic invaders and the Huns destroyed the Roman empire in the West, the arts went into further steep decline as brutish baseness replaced civilized sophistication as the culture of the ruling elites. Artistic production became inept, misshapen, vile and barbarous. There were some glimmers of hope in architecture from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards, as a few pioneers began to copy old Roman designs, but it was only from the middle of the thirteenth century that 'the rudeness of the modern use' in architecture was overcome, and people also began to aspire to the standards set by ancient sculptors and painters. The key pioneers of this rebirth included the artists Cimabue (d.1300) and Giotto (d.1337). Subsequent generations then built on their achievements, so that for Vasari the pinnacle had been reached with the work of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and 'the divine Michelangelo' (1475–1564), significantly the two Renaissance names that are most fixed in the popular consciousness even today.

On one level this looks like the myth-making of a tiny elite of artists, patrons and critics, which is precisely what it was, but the sort of aesthetic judgements formed by people such as Alberti and Vasari had a wider resonance. In the first place, the various movements in thought and practice that we (unsatisfactorily) group together under the term 'Renaissance' extended beyond art, architecture and sculpture to include poetry, music, history-writing, science, language-teaching, philosophy, political thought and many other branches of learning. These changes were mostly evident at the elite end of the cultural spectrum, of course, but their cumulative effect was to create a sense of profound detachment from the past among the most influential sections of society. This reinforced the sense that the barbarism of the 'middle period' was a general phenomenon applying to intellectual, artistic and cultural life across the board, not just to certain manifestations of it. Secondly, and following on from this perspective, it was natural for

elite writers and their readers, when thinking about the arts, to suppose that what we would call a society's 'high culture' was the most important and interesting manifestation of any given time and place in history. What might begin as an aesthetic judgement applied to one or two artistic forms, therefore, could expand progressively to become an assessment of the fundamental characteristics of a whole historical civilization. Thus, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scholars and intellectuals were beginning to think in terms of the 'middle age' as a global periodization applying to the political and religious as well as the cultural history of post-Roman Europe. It is sometimes said that the term 'Middle Ages' was definitively coined by a Swedish scholar named Christoph Keller (also known as Cellarius) in his *Historia Medii Aevi* (History of the Middle Ages), which appeared in 1688, but his claim to fame as the inventor of the idea is exaggerated, for the notion of a discrete historical period and form of civilization in the interval between ancient Rome and the Renaissance had already taken firm root by his day.

On the other hand, there still was, and long remained, considerable room for doubt about when this middle period began and ended. Perhaps the Middle Ages as we know them now were only truly invented in the nineteenth century, when some of the ideas and associations that had been swirling around for centuries were worked into a clearer and more rigid scheme that satisfied contemporary tastes for ordered, 'scientific' history. The single most important development in this context was the creation in Germany soon after the end of the Napoleonic Wars of the *Gesellschaft für Deutschlands ältere Geschichtskunde* (the Society for the Study of Early German History), the aim of which was to produce high-quality editions of medieval sources such as chronicles, charters, laws and letters. This project set new standards of technical proficiency, and the series of works that it began, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, or Germany's Historical Monuments (i.e. sources), is still going strong. Soon after the Society was first formed in 1819, its founding fathers decided to set terminal dates of 500 and 1500 for its work. In practice, these cut-off points were never observed rigidly, but the huge prestige that the *Monumenta* enjoyed in academic circles helped to cement its version of the chronological limits of the Middle Ages. This was reinforced by the fact that its understanding of what constituted 'German' blurred into what we would call 'Germanic', with the result that the early medieval histories of places such as France, Italy, and Spain also fell within its remit. This broad vision was the one carried over when the modern-style teaching of history began to

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emerge in schools and universities in the second half of the nineteenth century, becoming enshrined in the creation of new syllabuses and new academic titles. This system is essentially what universities today have inherited.

The years 500 and 1500 have a neat look to them, but in practice it has always proved possible to do some fiddling around the edges provided the basic chronological scheme is respected. In different countries, different terminal dates have commended themselves as reflections of the different narratives of national history. In Britain (and more specifically England), for example, it used to be common to end the Middle Ages in 1485, the year in which the last Plantagenet king, Richard III, was defeated at Bosworth by the future Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty. A great deal of modern scholarship has been devoted to establishing the many continuities that can be found in politics and government across the traditional divide, or to arguing that if there were key transitions, they happened earlier or later. Nonetheless 1485 lives on in the popular consciousness to some extent, and it also remains convenient scholarly shorthand for the medieval-to-modern break. Similarly, in France there is a long tradition of starting the Middle Ages in 496, the year in which, so it is believed, the Frankish king Clovis was baptized. Recent research is showing that the date is probably wrong, and that in any event Clovis' 'conversion' was actually a shift to Catholicism from another form of Christianity, not an epoch-making movement from pagan (= ancient) to Christian (= medieval) belief. Nonetheless the year still matters as a potent symbol, as demonstrated by the exhibitions and public commemorations organized for the fifteen hundredth anniversary in 1996.

Other dates have been chosen because their significance applies to Europe as a whole. This is the basis of the two most common terminal dates: 476, the year in which the last Roman emperor in the West was deposed (though in fact there was another imperial contender up to 480, and one must not forget that the sequence of emperors continued in the eastern part of the Empire up to 1453); and 1492, the year in which Christopher Columbus set out on his first voyage across the Atlantic and reached the Caribbean islands (though when one reads his account of the journey one is struck by the oddly low-key way in which it treats the 'first contact' encounter with the local people, an event which we nowadays imagine must have been one of the most charged moments in history). Historians often dislike fixed terminal dates because it seems to favour a rather old-fashioned view of history as a series of important events (or *histoire événementielle*, to borrow a useful

French term). There is a great deal to be said for this wariness, especially because event-centred history tends to elevate politics and warfare above other facets of human experience, such as, say, population change or environmental history, which are necessarily tracked across long stretches of time and cannot be pinned down to single defining moments. On the other hand, dates can be useful if they are used carefully as markers for long-term processes, not just one-off events viewed in isolation. 476 looks back to what once was, 1492 looks forward to what will be. They are the dates of supposedly momentous events, but they can also stand emblematically for processes that played out over much longer periods. This double-edged quality makes them work pretty well as clean boundaries that mark an intervening middle period.

Dates, then, can work as dividers provided one remembers that they only have a symbolic value and do not somehow 'prove' that significant historical change always happens abruptly. The problem then becomes, however, how to decide between the competing merits of different symbols. If not 476, then why not 312, the year in which the Roman emperor Constantine acknowledged Christianity? 325, the date of the Council of Nicaea, where Constantine's presence at a gathering of the senior clergy neatly symbolizes the very close relationship between the Church and secular government that was to characterize the medieval West as well as East; 363, the date of the death of the last pagan emperor, Julian; the Visigoth sack of Rome in 410 (or the Vandal sack of Rome in 455); the death in 454 of Aetius, the last effective Roman military leader in the West; the execution in 523 of the philosopher Boethius, a member of the old Roman aristocracy that had collaborated with the new Germanic regime in Italy; 535, the start of the hugely destructive attempt by the emperor in Constantinople, Justinian (527–65), to reconquer Italy for the Empire; or 630, the year in which the emperor Heraclius entered in triumph into Jerusalem to celebrate his recent against-the-odds victory over Sassanian Persia, the latest manifestation, that is to say, of the civilization to the east of the Mediterranean that had for many centuries fuelled first the Greeks' and then the Romans' sense of the 'Other'? These examples could be multiplied many times over, and the same is true of the other end of the Middle Ages. If not 1492, why not 1453, the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks? Or 1494, the year of the invasion of Italy by the armies of the French king, which can be construed as the dawn of a new phase in European power-politics? Or 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg, an event that has come to symbolize the beginning of the Reformation? Or 1521, when

Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors (as well as, it should be stressed, many local allies) finally smashed the power of the Aztec empire in Mexico? Or 1527, the sack of Rome by the armies of the emperor Charles V?

An interesting effect of playing this game of dates is that it becomes difficult, if not downright impossible, to elevate the claims of one date to particular symbolic significance without having to acknowledge the potential merits of many others. Ultimately, therefore, the process proves self-defeating. More significantly still, if one applies a range of criteria drawn from different branches of history – political, religious, military, scientific and others – in order to come up with clusters of potentially significant dates for the beginning and end of the Middle Ages, then it begins to look very strange that these clusters should be most conspicuous either side of c.500 and c.1500, give or take a century or so, and not in the very long expanse of time that falls in between. If one subjects this intermediate period to the same exercise, however, one quickly comes up with a long list of symbolically charged dates. But if that is so, why must *all* of these be less significant than *all* of our original examples? In other words, reducing signpost dates to the role of symbols, which is all they are, exposes how arbitrary it is to privilege two periods or phases – the years around 500 and those around 1500 – as necessarily and intrinsically more meaningful than anything that happened in the intervening thousand years.

It could be objected that historians seldom use single dates as key parts of their analyses, and that they argue instead in terms of long periods of transition. This is perfectly true and is an excellent illustration of the methodological deepening and thematic broadening of historical research over the last few decades. A great deal of recent research has shown, for example, that the Roman Empire in the West did not so much 'fall' as dissolve over the course of many centuries. One illustration of the need to track change over the long term is the fact that many of the fundamental problems that beset the late Roman state and played a significant part in its eventual demise, such as difficulties in recruiting and supplying its armies and in raising the taxes to plough into military organization, go back at least as early as the third century. Similarly, a famous thesis formulated by the pioneering economic historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935) argued that the basic economic system of the late Roman world survived the political collapse of the western empire in the fifth century because the Mediterranean remained a Roman 'lake' binding together the societies around it through trade and other links. This connection was only broken with the emergence of Islam in the seventh century. As the Arabs made

spectacular military conquests along the north African coast and into the Roman Middle East, they shattered the unity of this economic and cultural zone. This meant that the societies of north-western Europe, now economically cut off and thrown onto their own resources, had to develop new forms of wealth-creation based on the exploitation of land and on small-scale, local markets; and it was these new forms which were the basic underpinning of what became medieval society. Hence Pirenne's famous aphorism that without Mohammed, the founder of Islam, Charlemagne, the king of the Franks between 768 and 814, the first western ruler since the fifth century to revive the title of emperor, and the model *par excellence* for many later generations of rulers, would have been impossible. This thesis has been much debated and modified, not least because of enormous advances in archaeology since Pirenne's day, but for our purposes it is a good illustration of the value of thinking about long-term shifts in society and culture, rather than looking for the sudden and momentous event even when single events themselves, such as the military victories of the Arab armies, form part of the bigger picture.

The particular value of this sort of approach is that it allows for different sorts of transitions, political, economic, cultural, technological, environmental, and demographic, to be happening at the same time, and thereby better reflects the enormous complexity of human social experience. It also allows for changes to occur at different rates, and with different outcomes, in different places. This is vitally important because arguments for sudden change often proceed on the basis of privileging the perspectives of a small section of society, usually a rich, adult, male, educated elite positioned in the political centre, whereas other types of people in other situations would have experienced the forces shaping their lives in different ways. On the other hand, an emphasis on transitions rather than single dates only fudges the essential problem rather than solves it. For, if we still persist with the same basic binary divisions, classical-medieval and medieval-early modern/Renaissance, then this creates the expectation that at each end of the medieval period there was one decisive type of transition, the Big One, which was more significant than, and ultimately exercised a unique determining influence on, all the others. Whether you like your boundaries crisp or smudgy ultimately makes no difference as long as you believe that there is a real boundary out there somewhere waiting to be found.

If we stop focusing on the existence of boundaries in the first place, then the notion of the 'Middle Ages' is exposed as entirely artificial. This can be further demonstrated by looking at how our sense of what

made medieval life medieval is subtly but significantly inflected by the knock-on effects of the terminology we use for the period that comes next. If we think in terms of 'early modern history', this can subsume a wide range of historical changes. These might include a growth in the power and resources of national governments, which we can now begin to call 'states' without fear of anachronism; the growth of moveable-type printing; the extension of European maritime activity eastwards to Asia and westwards to the New World; the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. If we think in terms of the 'Renaissance', however, we are narrowing the focus to single out intellectual and artistic trends. These two clearly overlap. It would be impossible, for instance, to think about changes in Renaissance painting without considering the courtly culture and political self-fashioning of the rulers who patronized artists. But there are subtle differences. 'Early modern' is a potentially all-inclusive term whereas 'Renaissance' is more limited in its associations because it is mostly concerned with elite culture, as well as being more obviously gendered in its implications: as Joan Kelly asked in a famous article, 'Did women have a Renaissance?' The point here is that something as seemingly innocuous as a preference for one label or another has a substantial retroactive effect on our sense of what it is about the Middle Ages that mattered most. What, in other words, gives the Middle Ages their precise 'exit velocity'?

There are many other problems with our continuing attachment to the 'Middle Ages' and 'medieval'. One is the enormous chronological distortion that it introduces. Even if we accept the word 'medieval' as it has come to be used, the middle-ness that it expresses is coming to appear more and more inappropriate. The word worked well enough in its own terms in the days when the period before the Middle Ages was understood very narrowly to mean the thousand years or so between about 500 BC and 500 AD, and was geographically focused on Greece and Rome, with perhaps some extensions further back into ancient Egypt and Assyria, and the Israel of the Old Testament. Archaeology in particular has enormously expanded our knowledge of the chronological depth and geographical range of the ancient world, and this has pushed back the boundaries of what was once consigned to 'prehistory'. The result of this expansion of our knowledge of the ancient world is that it forces the supposedly middle period that comes after it more and more off centre. Increasingly, then, the middle-ness of the Middle Ages seems to be based on a narrow and dated vision of what matters in world history.

A further problem flows on from this. The word 'medieval' enshrines a vision of human history that is squarely centred on European civilization, more specifically Western, Christian civilization, which is seen as the cradle of various forces for human progress. In recent decades historians have grown increasingly uncomfortable with any narrative of human history that relies on the notion of progress and privileges one part of the world by downgrading the importance of others. The old approach, it is argued, severely misrepresents the significance, and different chronologies, of civilizations in Asia, Africa and America. More than this, it limits our attention unreasonably to supposedly advanced civilizations rather than all the forms of human economic, political and social organization in their immense variety. 'Medieval', then, is accused of being too weighed down by its Eurocentric baggage to remain a useful or appropriate term. In this context, it is all the more curious that the word has found a new lease of life among some historians of places such as Africa and India, who use it to refer to the period before the age of Western colonialism. The residual influence of Marxist thought has something to do with this, with its vision of societies passing through different developmental phases characterized by the ways in which wealth is generated and which elements in society get to control it. In this vision, 'medieval' is effectively a synonym for 'feudal' as shorthand for one of these phases, the one marked out by the dominance of a land-owning aristocracy whose wealth derives from their exploitation of a dependent peasantry. The effect of this borrowing is unfortunate, because the historians of these places might think that they are using 'medieval' as another, fairly neutral, way of saying 'pre-colonial', 'pre-modern' or 'pre-industrial', while they are in fact, and not always consciously, forcing the reader into inappropriate and contrived comparisons with European history. In fact, the value of the word 'medieval' can only stand or fall on the basis of its applicability to a certain expanse of time in western European history: the time and place, that is to say, for which the term was invented in the first place. Anything else is downright misplaced.

Terms can be so loaded that it becomes almost impossible to apply them as historical labels without reinforcing their false assumptions about the internal coherence of what they purport to designate. A good example of this is the use of the term 'the Sixties' to denote something more loaded with meaning than a straightforward ten-year slice of time. As the poet Philip Larkin famously wrote in his *Annus Mirabilis*, sexual intercourse (and so by extension the whole sexual and cultural revolution of the Sixties) started in 1963, between the lifting of the ban

on D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the release of the Beatles' first LP. The chronology does not in fact stand up to close scrutiny: the landmark trial in which the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were unsuccessfully prosecuted for obscenity took place in October–November 1960; and the album *Please Please Me* came out in Britain in March 1963. But Larkin's use of poetic licence nicely demonstrates the point that a date such as 1963, and the era which it supposedly opens, can take on an emblematic significance which transcends what actually happened. Any appreciation of the 'Sixties' conceived in the same sort of ways that Larkin envisaged, as a distinctive social, cultural and political moment, would, moreover, need to extend into the 1970s, up to the Oil Crisis in 1973, for example, or the American withdrawal from Vietnam.

In general terms, the 'Sixties' evokes various more or less concurrent movements in parts of the Western world involving music and other facets of pop culture, shifts in gender politics, social liberalization, and civil rights reform. Processes such as the Vietnam War and the opposition it provoked (but not, significantly, the support it received) have become condensed into a gallery of iconic images that, we can be made to believe, capture the look and feel of this period. A good way of thinking about this is to consider how often we see shows on television which evoke the Sixties by flashing up a small but powerful repertoire of clichéd images: for example, the flickering footage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Beatles arriving in New York, Martin Luther King giving a speech, hippies out of their heads (or mugging for the camera?) at Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love, Huey helicopters flying low over paddyfields, all this set to a soundtrack of The Rolling Stones' 'Paint it Black' or the organ solo in The Doors' 'Light My Fire'. The more we encounter this sort of selection of evocative images and sounds, and the more we practise joining up the dots to fill in what is left unstated, the more validated the 'Sixties' becomes as a point of historical reference, and the more we trust that there is indeed a master-narrative which draws all the disparate elements together. In reality, of course, there are many powerful reasons for challenging the portmanteau use of the term. The cultural and social changes associated with the Sixties affected different parts of the world, even different parts of the West, in diverse ways. And perceptions of what was happening varied according to age, class, educational background and gender. There was no single 'Sixties' at all. Nonetheless, the term creates an expectation, and we find ourselves trying to meet it. Precisely the same thing happens whenever we use 'Middle Ages' or 'medieval'.

At least the 'Sixties' only lasted a decade or so, and if people choose to take different positions on when they began and ended, the disagreements are only going to turn on a few years either way. By and large, the slices into which we divide history become shorter and more precisely delineated the nearer we get to the present day. Think, for example, of the range of subtle but significant differences that can be evoked by juxtaposing the 'Sixties' against the 'Fifties' or the 'Seventies'. The further back in time we go, however, the thicker the slicing. We can imagine, for instance, *belles époques*, *finis de siècles*, Golden Ages, *anciens régimes*, and so forth that lasted anything from a few decades to a century or so. By the time that we get back to around 1500, the coarsening process has reached the point where we can happily countenance a block of history lasting a thousand years. Why? Because not much changed during that time. And why did not much change? Because it was the Middle Ages. The circularity of the argument is obvious, but the assumptions that underpin it are nonetheless powerful. Even the subdivision of the Middle Ages into different phases – 'early'/'central'/'late' or 'early'/'high', for example – only reinforces the problem by trying to identify subtle shades of difference while implicitly validating the overall category of medieval-ness.

The basic problem is the sheer chronological and geographical mass of what normally falls under the heading 'medieval'. If the lived experiences of a seventh-century Italian aristocrat, a tenth-century German nun, a twelfth-century Spanish bishop and a fourteenth-century Icelandic farmer are all in some way 'medieval', what are we saying? That despite all the numerous and profound differences that separate these individuals' mental and physical worlds, there must nonetheless be something deep, deep down in a fundamental, perhaps unsensed, recess of their being which they all have in common. And secondly, we are saying that it is thanks to this shared quality that we are equipped to speak of their common medieval-ness. But what on earth could this mysterious essence be? And if it is such a fundamental part of these people's beings, which logically it has to be to include every man, woman and child in half a continent over a millennium, then how strange that this same essence should be wholly and abruptly absent from the people on either side of the traditional cut-off points, from, say, a third-century Roman prostitute or a sixteenth-century Protestant preacher. This is an obvious point, of course, but one that needs to be made: 'medieval' is simply too unwieldy.

This exposes another ~~problem~~ problem, that of asymmetry within and at either end of a historical period. The longer the period that a label

covers, the more glaring this problem appears. Take, for example, the 'Sixties' as previously discussed. Whatever particular nuance we might place on our chosen definition of the term, by emphasizing political and economic conditions, for example, or pop-cultural trends, it is a fairly straightforward exercise to begin and end the period by applying the same sets of criteria. To take a superficial but clear example: if the Sixties started around the time of the Beatles' first LP, then perhaps they ended when the Beatles broke up in 1970. Whatever our chosen dates and the route we take to arrive at them, we are equipped to apply a label such as the 'Sixties' to the extent that we are tracking the emergence and then disappearance of selected diagnostic characteristics which we believe had an unbroken existence in the intervening period. The intro and the outro are in some sort of balance. To take another example, we might argue that the term 'Golden Age' when used of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic is justified by the emergence, continuing presence and then decline or disappearance of a number of key features such as commercial prosperity, political expansion and artistic accomplishment. The period lasts longer than the decade or so covered by the 'Sixties', but it is still reasonably tightly delineable, with the result that the changes in conditions that mark its beginning and end stand in some sort of equal-and-opposite relationship to one another.

But when one comes to a period as large and unwieldy as the Middle Ages, any hope of symmetry vanishes. The problem is compounded by the fact that scholarly debates about the beginning and the end of the Middle Ages are seldom conducted with close and direct reference to each other. This is fair enough, because the two sets of scholars involved have specialisms about a thousand years apart. But the effect for the medievalist somewhere in the middle is like trying to listen to two different conversations at the same time. If, for the sake of argument, one were to say that the single most important transition from the classical to the medieval world was a social and economic transformation affecting the ways in which the land-owning minority exploited the human resources of the majority who worked the fields, then we would need to find an equivalent transition of equal significance to mark the end of the Middle Ages, if we want to balance things out. But if, again for the sake of argument, we were to consider that the most significant shift from the medieval to early modern worlds was cultural, a process primarily manifested in art, architecture and literature, then we present ourselves with a Middle Ages which seems to start one way and finish in quite another. Of course, both the socio-economic *and* cultural conditions of western Europe were very

different in c.500 from what they were c.1500. But that is precisely the point: if there is so much difference at either end of the Middle Ages, why the need to use these particular times to frame a historical period in the first place?

The good news is that we are perhaps not so stuck with the terms 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' as we might think. It is indeed possible to reduce, if not entirely eliminate, our dependency on additive labels. The recent fate of the words 'feudal' and 'feudalism' offers an apt and salutary illustration. Strictly speaking, 'feudal' is the adjective relating to the noun 'fee' or 'fief'. A fief was what in modern legal parlance would be called the consideration of a contract: the material benefit or payment granted to someone when he (or, more rarely, she) entered into someone else's service and formally swore fidelity to him (or, more rarely, her). Often the fief consisted of one or more parcels of land, but it could be any income-generating source such as a share in a rent or a toll. In the classic textbook model of feudalism, the service promised to the lord was military in nature, especially what could be offered by a man equipped to fight as a knight or to lead a team of knights, but again there was a wide variety of arrangements according to the needs and status of the contracting parties. In narrow terms, therefore, feudal relationships operated on the level of what we would today call property law and the law of contract.

In practice, however, because earlier generations of historians believed that fief-holding was a fundamental feature of medieval life, especially between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, the range of associations connected to the words 'feudal' and 'feudalism' expanded to cover the whole political, military, economic, social and cultural environment in which the granting of fiefs took place. In the process, 'feudal society' became conceptualized not just as the time and place where fiefs happened to exist, but as a whole civilization characterized by, for example, the weakness of central governmental authority and the usurpation of power by local strongmen; the privatization of justice and law courts; the dominance of an aristocracy that emphasized its military identity in its self-fashioning; the exploitation by the aristocracy of the majority of the population, who were tied to the land by various legal and economic constraints; and particular institutional forms of that exploitation designed to facilitate group farming activity, for example in manors. The most influential exposition of 'feudal society' conceived in this broad sense was in the French historian Marc Bloch's *La société féodale*, which appeared in 1940 (an English translation, *Feudal Society*, was published in 1961). Bloch was the greatest

medieval historian of his generation, perhaps the greatest ever, and his book can still be read with profit today even though most of its bigger arguments and many of its smaller ones have been overturned by more recent research.

Bloch's enormous influence placed a scholarly imprimatur on a maximal, all-inclusive reading of 'feudal' and 'feudalism'. This reinforced other, more overtly negative, approaches to the terms which had been gaining ground since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the priorities of the French Revolution, for example, was to abolish the 'feudal' rights of the hated aristocracy. These were tax exemptions and legal privileges which mostly went back no further than 200 or so years. But it is easy to see how the rhetoric could be stretched further back in time to condemn the medieval predecessors (and in some cases distant ancestors) of the *ancien régime* aristocracy, an elite that had likewise prospered at the expense of the majority. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under the influence of Marxist thought, feudalism became bound up with what was believed to be the period in human development before the advent of bourgeois capitalism; the main characteristics of this phase were thought to be the ascendancy of a largely rural aristocracy whose control of the means of production, essentially landed property and agricultural labour, was achieved through political and military mastery and the use of ties of dependency to keep the peasantry firmly in its place.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that 'feudal' expanded to the point where it became a synonym for 'medieval' itself. A wonderful illustration of the ease with which the connection could be made comes from a film review written by the novelist Graham Greene in 1937. Greene was reviewing *Marked Woman*, a movie starring among others Bette Davis and an up-and-coming Humphrey Bogart. The film is set in a dark, seedy, criminal underworld. Greene wrote:

'It's feudal,' a character remarks with resignation in *Marked Woman*, and there are moments of creative imagination...in this picture of the night-club racket and the night-club baron which do convey some of the horror and pathos the Anglo-Saxon chronicler recorded of Stephen's reign: the exactions, the beatings and murders, and above all the hopelessness...It's been done before, of course, this picture of the feudal hell, but it has never been done better than in some of these scenes.¹²

This evocation of a feudal nightmare world is all the more fascinating for being based on an above-average knowledge of the Middle Ages.

The reference to the chronicler is to a well-known passage in one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which bemoans the disorder that had befallen England during the reign of King Stephen (1135–54), nineteen long years, it says, during which Christ and his saints slept. Given how much Greene warmed to his medieval theme, it seems almost churlish to point out that it was all a silly mistake. What the character in the film is actually saying is 'it's futile'. In fairness to Greene, the difference between the American pronunciations of 'futile' and 'feudal', which is clear enough to an American speaker, is usually lost on a British listener, who distinguishes differently between the sounds of 'r' and 'd' placed between vowels, and rhymes 'futile' with 'mille'. For our purposes, the point to stress is the ease with which Greene, once he made the initial mistake, and pitching his remarks to a fairly broad readership, could mine a rich seam of associations and images, all of them dark, about medieval life in general.

Greene's usage still survives, in particular in relation to some of the more disapproving visions of medieval civilization that we encountered in Chapter 1. One sometimes encounters 'feudal' used in newspapers, for example, to describe the way of life in socially stratified, politically volatile and economically undeveloped parts of the Third World. Indeed, the word has survived as a means of registering disapproval of non-Western societies, and of affirming the idea of 'progress' towards Western-style liberal capitalism, without appearing to stray into political incorrectness. On the other hand, it is fair to say that the extent to which 'feudal' and 'feudalism' are current in popular discourses has declined in recent decades. In part this is because the appeal of Marxist thought has diminished since the end of the Cold War. But it also relates to changes in scholarly usage, and this is indeed one of the fairly rare examples of how historiographical fashions can alter popular perceptions in a fairly short space of time, if only negatively by cutting off the scholarly oxygen to a term or concept that has entered non-academic discourse. Medievalists today are generally much more wary of the terms 'feudal' and 'feudalism', and many try to avoid them altogether. A landmark event was the appearance in 1974 of an article by E. A. R. Brown, 'The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe'. In this article, Brown forcefully attacked the prevalence of the terms 'feudal' and 'feudalism' in academic debate. There were too many definitions in circulation to make the words useful, she pointed out, and every definition was so hedged around with geographical and chronological qualifications that even more confusion was the inevitable result. Moreover, the notion of the 'feudal system' was in fact a creation of lawyers and political theorists in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not a true encapsulation of medieval conditions. Brown's article has been hugely influential, and rightly so. One way to judge this is to read back to back Bloch's *Feudal Society* and Susan Reynolds' important book *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, which appeared in 1994 and is, significantly, dedicated to Brown. Reynolds offers a full and insightful analysis of the fief and of what we would once have called 'feudal' relationships in western Europe by carefully discussing their varying significance at different times and places, in the process demonstrating that it is possible to explore the topic fully without having to turn 'feudal' into 'medieval', and 'feudalism' into the leitmotif for a whole civilization.

If we can scale down the use of the word 'feudal', then perhaps we can aspire to do something similar with 'medieval'. Perhaps we can even think about getting rid of the word altogether. This would not be iconoclasm for its own sake, for the benefits for scholars, students and general readers alike would be considerable and enduring. If we abolished the terms 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' tomorrow, the important thing would be not to find alternative labels that simply filled the same mental spaces. Instead, in our brave new 'post-medieval' world we would have to learn to live with a large repertoire of overlapping, perhaps even conflicting, labels relating to much smaller slices of time. Perhaps we could set ourselves an upper limit of 150–200 years for the duration of any one period label, simply in order to wean ourselves off the instinctive sense that history around this time comes in large chunks. We could restrict ourselves to chronological designations such as 'tenth-century France' and 'late fourteenth-century Florence' in the interests of being as neutral as possible. Or if we wanted to be more evocative, we could aim to develop systems of labels, building on those already in use as subsets of 'medieval', that jarringly cut across disciplinary boundaries. This would serve as a constant reminder that the splitting of the experiences of the societies we are studying into various categories such as political, cultural, economic, literary and intellectual, says much more about modern divisions of scholarly labour than it does about the past itself. Thus, we could apply periodizations originating in architectural or iconographic history to the study of politics, or terms derived from monastic history to the study of the agrarian economy.

The effect of all this change would no doubt be unsettling, but it would demonstrate how all facets of history join up, and it would expose the ways in which existing labelling regimes are often the

unwanted traces of redundant academic turf wars. There would probably be a period of labelling anarchy before a consensus emerged within and beyond the academic community about which words to use and why. And one likely result of this in the shorter term would be a haemorrhaging of public interest away from the period formerly known as medieval, and towards other historical eras that clung on to their reassuringly familiar brand names. But the benefits in the long run would be enormous. We would be liberated from a conceptual framework that conceals more than it reveals, and we would be open to explore new, unvoiced, possibilities without worrying that we always have to justify ourselves in relation to one dominant chronological construct. In short, it would be nice to be able to say without a trace of irony that the Middle Ages never existed!

In an ideal world, then, we could do away with 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages', not in a spirit of hostility towards the period, but on the contrary as a recognition of the growing theoretical sophistication, methodological variety and thematic range that characterize modern medieval studies. As research into aspects of the Middle Ages develops on numerous fronts, our continued use of one catch-all set of terms looks more and more strained. It is starting to look like the triumph of packaging over content, something sold to the outside world but not believed in by its practitioners. Back in the real world, however, we have to live with what there is, not what we wish there would be. The remainder of this book will therefore continue to use 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages', subject to the proviso that they principally refer, not to the totality of what actually happened between about 500 and 1500, but to the narrative strategies and analytical frameworks that modern scholarship has inherited or devised. If approached in this limited sense, 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages' can still be used, if extremely cautiously. It is deceptively easy to slip back into assuming that there is a real relationship between a thing and the words used of it, that medieval-ness actually existed. One must always be ready to challenge this sort of assumption, and it has to be admitted that this constant process of mentally going back to basics can be wearying and unsettling. But, viewed more positively, it is also a large part of the challenge and fascination of studying what, simply for the sake of convenience, we must continue to call the medieval period.

Also by Marcus Bull:

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