



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Fifty Years of Early Medieval History<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article reflects on the phrase ‘early medieval’ as applied to European history between the end of Roman political rule in the West and some indeterminate point in the tenth or eleventh centuries. It is framed with reference to Michael Wallace-Hadrill’s 1974 lecture entitled ‘Early Medieval History’, which serves as a foil for a discussion of the evolving historiographical landscape from 1974 to 2024. The origins and the chronology of the term’s adoption into English usage are reviewed and, with an eye to discourses of modernity, the elements of middle-ness and early-ness are dissected. Points of comparison and contrast with the notion of ‘early modernity’ are noted, while an emphasis on the entanglement of middle-ness with European-ness leads into a discussion of whether the term has any applicability to extra-European history. The article concludes by highlighting the value of the weak relationship of ‘early medieval’ to modernity.

Fifty years ago, in 1974 (two years after the first issue of *Anglo-Saxon England* was published), Michael Wallace-Hadrill delivered his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford. He took as his theme ‘Early Medieval History’. After paying homage to his predecessor but one, Richard Southern, he declared:

The public shape of the earlier Middle Ages, at least in the West, is the only thing about them we need not question. One could put it this way: post-Antique

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<sup>1</sup> Hamish Scott *in memoriam*.

to the seventh century and pre-medieval to the tenth, or so I am told, the shape is determined by collapse and invasion at the start and, at the end, by invasion and collapse.<sup>2</sup>

Their ‘public shape’ presented these centuries as an interstitial period, neither ancient nor medieval, one whose narrative arc was framed by dismal events. Wallace-Hadrill’s inaugural lecture marks the point at which the notion of ‘early medieval’ entered common English-language parlance, and its publication happened to coincide with my arrival in Cambridge to read History in the autumn of 1975, already keenly interested in the Middle Ages and specifically Anglo-Saxon history. My historical formation, then, coincided with the appearance of ‘early medieval’ on the historical landscape, even though I did not purchase a copy of *Early Medieval History* until two years later. I shall retire from the same chair that Michael Wallace-Hadrill held exactly fifty years after I began my undergraduate degree, and as *Anglo-Saxon England* rebrands itself as *Early Medieval England and its Neighbours*, it seems an opportune moment for me to take stock.<sup>3</sup>

‘Early medieval’ is a catch-phrase whose parameters are often taken for granted. I consider it here primarily as a way of thinking about its frame of reference rather than scrutinising how it has responded to changing currents of historical research. As will become evident, Wallace-Hadrill mused upon its chronological parameters and on what, if anything, distinguishes the early Middle Ages from the Middle Ages more generally. My retrospective vantage point puts his views in context, and extends the discussion to include its intellectual genealogy and relationship to issues of periodisation and geographical scope. My comments are based on two interconnected premises: that periodisation is utilitarian and not heuristic, but that, in the emphatic words of Jacques Le Goff, ‘there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time up into smaller parts.’<sup>4</sup> In other words, slicing the past into defined segments is a practical necessity for demarcating the beginning and end points of courses or textbooks but carries no explanatory value whatsoever, while the labels chosen for them are laden with implicit value judgements.

One point needs to be made immediately: Wallace-Hadrill did not invent the notion of the ‘early Middle Ages’, much though his work contributed to its dissemination. His publishing career began in earnest in 1950, when Frank Stenton’s magisterial *Anglo-Saxon England* was then less than ten years old.<sup>5</sup> As a way of denoting ‘early medieval England’ his formulation reigned supreme until recently, but what of Britain more generally, and indeed the Continent too?

<sup>2</sup> ‘Early Medieval History’, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 1–18, at 1.

<sup>3</sup> The Chichele Chair of Modern History was founded in response to the Royal Commission of 1850 and first filled in 1862. A tradition that its incumbent be a medievalist gradually evolved, and the chair’s title was changed to reflect this in 1983, the year before Michael Wallace-Hadrill retired. The title Chichele Professor of Medieval History was first held by Karl Leyser (1984–8). Part of what follows is a reworking of my comments in ‘Regarding Medievalists: Contexts and Approaches’, *Companion to Historiography*, ed. M. Bentley (London, 1997), pp. 105–16.

<sup>4</sup> J. Le Goff, trans. M. DeBevoise, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* (New York, 2015), p. 2. First published as *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?* (Paris, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> First published Oxford, 1943.

The expression ‘Dark Ages’ had been taken into English from humanist usage by the seventeenth century and remained widespread until the 1950s–60s.<sup>6</sup> It was an expression that Wallace-Hadrill scrupulously eschewed, however. So whence the ‘early Middle Ages’? An online title search produces a pattern of intermittent academic use from the late nineteenth century onwards, primarily in Germany and the USA.<sup>7</sup> The two British titles that did use the phrase at the start of the twentieth century both leant heavily on German scholarship.<sup>8</sup> The expression had no real purchase among historians in the British Isles: Wallace-Hadrill published his first book, *The Barbarian West, 400–1000* in London in 1952, but a decade later the first New York edition changed the title to *The Barbarian West: the Early Middle Ages, AD 400–1000*.<sup>9</sup>

On the continent, things were rather different however. French, German and Italian historians were all familiar with an ‘early’ subdivision of the Middle Ages by the 1840s. A segmented Middle Ages thus preceded the close bond between the new nation-states of late nineteenth-century Europe and the emerging academic historical and archival professions, which did so much to undergird their sense of identity. So when in 1952 Giuseppe Ermini, Rector of the University of Perugia (and later the Italian Minister of Education) founded the *Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo* (CISAM) at Spoleto, and then in 1964 Karl Hauck set up the University of Münster’s multi-disciplinary *Institut für Frühmittelalterforschung* in 1964, both were employing standard chronological delimiters.<sup>10</sup> Together, the themed conference volumes produced annually by CISAM since 1953, and the Münster journal *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, first published in 1967, have shaped the subject.<sup>11</sup> From the outset, both publications featured a trickle of foreign scholars; multiple languages soon appeared. As the trickle steadily

<sup>6</sup> For example: D. B. Harden, ed., *Dark Age Britain: Studies presented to E. T. Leeds* (London, 1956); W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (New York, 1958); H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages* (London, 1959); R. S. Lopez, *The Tenth Century: How Dark the Dark Ages?* (New York, 1959); L. Alcock, *Dinas Powys: An Iron Age, Dark Age and Early Medieval Settlement in Glamorgan* (Cardiff, 1963); D. Talbot Rice, *The Dark Ages: the Making of European Civilization* (London, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> For example: A. J. Carlyle, ‘Some Points in the Political Theory of the Early Middle Ages’, *Economic Rev.* 5 (1891), 319–37; J. Cameron-Taylor, ‘Roman Law in the Early Middle Ages’, *Juridical Rev.* 7 (1895), 241–50; D. C. Munro, *The Attitude of the Western Church towards the Study of the Latin Classics in the Early Middle Ages* (New York, 1897); F. Schaub, *Studien zur Geschichte der Sklaverei im Frühmittelalter* (Berlin, 1913); H. von Schubert, *Geschichte der christlichen Kirche im Frühmittelalter: ein Handbuch* (Tübingen, 1921); D. M. Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages (1066–1307)* (Harmondsworth, 1951); M. L. W. Laistner, *The Intellectual Heritage of the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> J. von Pflugk-Harttung, *The Early Middle Ages*, trans. under the supervision of J. H. Wright (London, 1902) and W. Stubbs, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, 476–1250*, ed. A. Hassall (London, 1908), the text of Stubbs’s Oxford lectures on this subject.

<sup>9</sup> Published by Hutchinsons University Library (London, 1952) and Harper & Bros (New York, 1962) respectively. Similarly, the London publication of Eleanor Shipley Duckett’s *The Wandering Saints* was changed by her New York publisher to *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages* (London: Collins, 1959; New York: Norton, 1959).

<sup>10</sup> I used Google Books and Google Ngram Viewer to provide a rough-and-ready guide to the occurrence of *Frühmittelalter*, *haut moyen âge* and *alto medioevo*.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.cisam.org/la-fondazione/> and <https://www.uni-muenster.de/Fruehmittelalter/Projekte/forschungsansatze/index.html>.

swelled, so the volumes contributed to internationalising discussions and familiarising scholars with the sources, methods, questions and priorities of their colleagues from other countries.

Although Wallace-Hadrill had attended the 1960 Spoleto conference, this was not the inspiration for 'Early Medieval History'. Until interrupted by his years of war service in intelligence and interrogation work, his first research steps had concerned the Charlemagne legends of the central Middle Ages. On returning to academic life, however, he redirected his focus to earlier centuries, putting his wartime fluency in French and German (but not Italian) to good academic use and building a scholarly life characterised by contacts with Francophone and, increasingly, West German medievalists of his own generation.<sup>12</sup> Eugen Ewig, one of the few German historians who had managed to remain untainted by the Nazi régime and a crucial facilitator of Franco-German post-war academic rapprochement, held a special place in Wallace-Hadrill's esteem and friendship, and they published alongside each other in the second volume of *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*.<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Hadrill's article had begun life as a paper presented in Dijon in 1965 but then delivered in several German universities in 1967. In comparing Gregory of Tours and Bede, he opined that 'They at once witness to and, in a way, help to create, the early Middle Ages'.<sup>14</sup> We might say exactly the same about Ermini, Hauck, Ewig, and Wallace-Hadrill.

The British-based journal *Early Medieval Europe* was a relative latecomer to the field, founded only in 1992 but rapidly establishing itself as a field-defining publication.<sup>15</sup> As its founding editors remarked, previous generations of scholars had been more isolated from each other, siloed by national and philological specialisms. Furthermore, paradigms deeply entrenched in the nineteenth-century origins of academic history also tended to keep Visigoths, Lombards, Franks and so forth apart from one another.<sup>16</sup> With some modification, Wallace-Hadrill had effectively retained this approach in *The Barbarian West*.<sup>17</sup> As a concept which was multi-disciplinary (and at times even interdisciplinary) and international, the early Middle Ages had been born as scholars gathered together in annual conferences in an effort to come to terms with the traumas of World War II, but then came of age in the era of cheap air travel and funded international

<sup>12</sup> I. Wood, 'John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, 1916–1985', *PBA* 124 (2004), 333–55. On the strongly Francophile tendencies among postwar medieval historians in England, see C. Leyser, 'Introduction: England and the Continent', *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century: Studies in honour of Wilhelm Levison (1876–1947)*, ed. D. Rollason, C. Leyser and H. Williams, Stud. in the Early Middle Ages 37 (Turnhout, 2010), 1–13, at 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> W. Paravicini, 'Eugen Ewig (1913–2006) in memoriam', *Francia* 34 (2007), 223–36.

<sup>14</sup> 'Gregory of Tours and Bede: their Views on the Personal Qualities of Kings', *FS* 2 (1968), 31–44, at 31.

<sup>15</sup> Of the founding editors (T. S. Brown, Edward James, Rosamond McKitterick, David Rollason and Alan Thacker), Brown and McKitterick are among the former journal editors interviewed to mark the journal's thirtieth anniversary: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/14680254/homepage/30th-anniv-talks>.

<sup>16</sup> Discussed in detail by I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> He added a chapter on the Visigoths to the third edition, in 1967. See also the comments of Wood, 'Wallace-Hadrill', 337.

projects.<sup>18</sup> And what of the age of social media? The Middle Ages have been both democratised and abused, no aspect more so than all things ‘Anglo-Saxon’, but the early Middle Ages more generally have not been entirely exempt.<sup>19</sup>

Before going any further, it is important to recognise that ‘early medieval’ is a compound. Each element deserves comment in its own right. First, its medievalness, in other words, its middle-ness. Petrarch had certainly characterised the centuries between the end of Antiquity and his own day as dismal ones of sloth and shamefulness; he commonly, though probably erroneously, is also hailed as being the first to demarcate them as a ‘middle’ era.<sup>20</sup> Credit for conceptualising a distinct period, a *media tempestas*, between Antiquity and the present instead goes to Giovanni Andrea Bussi in 1496, with the notion only slowly gaining traction in the sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup> In defining the ‘middle age’ by its deficiencies, Italian humanists provided the seed from which a temporal sequence from Antiquity, via the Middle Ages to the Modern era was to grow. The notion slowly caught on among German humanist scholars in the course of the sixteenth century, culminating in Christoph Keller’s 1688 textbook, *Historia medii aevi a temporibus Constantini magni ad Constantinopolitam a Turcis captam*. This is widely accepted as the point at which a threefold division of history definitively superseded older, biblically derived notions of different epochs and hardened into standardised usage. Although the chronological delimiters of this middle period have fluctuated – and continue to do so – none of the suggested alternative periodisations of European history have ever fully taken root.<sup>22</sup> Medievalists, then, are perpetually condemned to middle-ness.

The period-in-between has had a troubled relationship with what went before and what came after. For rather different reasons, both concern us here. The aftermath is the more problematic of the two. Middle-ness always implies something that comes after, something different. With or without being modified as ‘early’, the ‘after’ is inevitably modernity. As Dan Smail and Andrew Shryock have demonstrated, ‘premodern’ has exploded into common usage since 1980, the

<sup>18</sup> For reflections, see I. N. Wood, ‘Report: the European Science Foundation’s Programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and Emergence of Early Medieval Europe’, *EME* 6 (1997), 217–27. Note the caveats of C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 1–3.

<sup>19</sup> R. Naismith, ‘The Anglo-Saxons: Myth and History’, *EMEN* 51 (2025), e1. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ean.2024.2>. Two North American collections of essays speak to these issues: C. Chazelle, S. Doubleday, F. Lifshitz and A. G. Remensnyder, *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice* (Abingdon, 2012), and A. Albin, M. C. Erler, T. O’Donnell, N. L. Paul and N. Rowe, *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past* (New York, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> F. Petrarch, *Poemata minora quae exstant omnia nunc primo ad trutinam revocata ac recensita*, 3 vols. (Milan, 1831–1834) II, 262; trans. D. R. Kelley, *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 1991), pp. 220–1.

<sup>21</sup> I follow J.-D. Morerod, ‘La base textuelle d’un mythe historiographique: le Moyen Âge des humanistes italiens’, *Retour aux sources: textes, études et documents d’histoire médiévale offerts à Michel Parisse*, ed. S. Gougenheim, M. Goulet, O. Kammerer et al. (Paris, 2004), pp. 943–53.

<sup>22</sup> Well surveyed by T. Reuter, ‘Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?’ in his *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J. L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 19–37. First published in *Med. Hist. Jnl* 1 (1998), 25–45.

counterpoint to ‘postmodern’.<sup>23</sup> Both are refinements of the notion of ‘modernity’, so entrenched in our cultural world since the twentieth century. Modernity, they argue, has created a ‘pre’ and ask: ‘How do we contemplate the “pre” without getting hopelessly tangled in the modern? Is it possible to write an autonomous history of the past?’<sup>24</sup> Their own answer is to shift to deep history, but institutional and funding constraints (quite apart from individual preferences) mean that is not a feasible swerve for most of us. As medievalists, that leaves us in an intellectual world that is ‘pre-’: always prior to something more important, more consequential, more developed, more interesting, more studied.

Early-ness, on the other hand, responds to the vastness of the ‘Middle Ages’ as conventionally conceived. Remarking upon the need to subdivide it into manageable sub-periods, Tim Reuter pointed out that Romance-speaking countries prefer the metaphor of High and Low commonly applied to rivers and mountains, whereas the Germanic-speaking countries tend to follow the diurnal rhythm of the sun, dividing the Middle Ages into Early, High and Late.<sup>25</sup> Although there have been attempts to formulate alternative periodisations, they have failed to dislodge this tripartite division from predominance.<sup>26</sup>

But there may be more behind early-ness than merely the practical need to keep units of analysis manageable. There is a remarkable parallel to the appearance of ‘early modernity’ around 1970 and the separating out of the first centuries of the modern epoch into a period in its own right, noticeable in West German and US usage a full generation before historians in the UK adopted the term.<sup>27</sup> Early modernity, it has been suggested, was, at least in part, a reaction against the gravitational pull of modernisation theories, an effort to ensure that the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were post-medieval but not properly modern.<sup>28</sup> If early-ness is a response to the spectre of teleology, then ‘early medieval’ exists in counterpoint to the Middle Ages of Richard Southern. Famously, Southern characterised a world in which ‘eleventh-century pioneers ... were bringing into existence a civilization, so different from the painful reconstruction of the Carolingian age in its apparently effortless variety and spontaneity.’<sup>29</sup> Even if early-ness helps specialists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mitigate the shadow of modernity, and even if it enables

<sup>23</sup> D. L. Smail and A. Shryock, ‘History and the “Pre”’, *AHR* 118 (2013), 709–37, at 712.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 711.

<sup>25</sup> Reuter, ‘Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?’ p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> H. Scott, ‘Early Modern History: its Present and its Past’, *Canadian Jnl of Hist./Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 57 (2022), 280–92, at 290–1, for proposals that span the late Middle Ages and early modern eras; F. Mazel, ‘Un, deux, trois Moyen Âge...Enjeux et critères des périodisations internes de l’époque médiévale’, *ATALA Culture et sciences humaines* 17 (2014), 101–13, for the recent French vogue for a bipartite subdivision.

<sup>27</sup> W. Reinhard, ‘The Idea of Early Modern History’, *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Bentley, pp. 281–92; Scott, ‘Early Modern History’.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, ‘Early Modern History’, 284–5.

<sup>29</sup> R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1953), p. 257. See also R. J. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonisation and Change, 950–1350* (London, 1993). Southern held the Chichele Chair from 1961 until 1969; Geoffrey Barraclough’s brief tenure followed, prior to Wallace-Hadrill’s election in 1974.

specialists in the seventh to tenth centuries to sidestep a ‘making’ that got underway around the turn of the millennium, nothing can sever middle-ness from what came after. The crucial point is that early-ness is a second-order periodisation which qualifies but cannot negate the irreducible middle-ness of the Middle Ages.

As medievalists, then, our collective identity inevitably encodes an element of teleology. In the past, it has sometimes been explicit, most notoriously perhaps in Joseph Strayer’s *The Medieval Origins of the Modern State*.<sup>30</sup> That book stands as a monument to a distinctively North American interpretation of Europe’s Middle Ages. Originating as lectures given in 1961 in Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, it also serves as a potent reminder that, in the anglophone world as elsewhere, the instrumentalisation of the Middle Ages in the service of twenty-first century ideology is nothing new.<sup>31</sup> Pointing this out, however, does not remove the underlying whiff of teleology: unless and until historians agree a common alternative mode of periodisation, we cannot ignore this. And it is not just historians who need to acknowledge this, for whatever their particular discipline, sub-period, specialisation or theoretical approach, medievalists have remarkably little intellectual commonality apart from the chronological delimiters of the field: middle-ness is the conceptual glue that gives such coherence as there is to Medieval Studies.<sup>32</sup>

Those who catapulted the early Middle Ages into common usage rarely worried about that, but usually knew what the expression meant. Hauck decided it ran from Constantine I to Gregory VII, and included eastern Europe and Byzantium as well as the Latin West. The founding editors of *Early Medieval Europe* thought in terms of rounded centuries, settling on the fourth to eleventh. They included the British Isles and Ireland, Iceland and Scandinavia but excluded Byzantium. These parameters have now been modified to include a firm political starting date: the journal covers the period ‘from the fall of the Roman empire’ yet it retains a soft eleventh-century terminus plus a geographical scope which now embraces the Mediterranean.<sup>33</sup> As for Wallace-Hadrill, he modulated his views towards the end of his inaugural lecture. Having admitted that ‘the western centuries between the fifth and the tenth do share certain characteristics that distinguish them from earlier and later centuries’, he nevertheless refused to see them as ‘a clearly defined period, as historians use that term.’ And he went on to explain why he could diagnose no ‘clean beginning’ for early medieval history. Its end vexed him even more: ‘As to the end of it, the situation is worse. The eleventh century indeed marks a beginning, but it does not mark an

<sup>30</sup> First published: Princeton, 1970.

<sup>31</sup> Its origin and intellectual context are set out by William Chester Jordan in his foreword to the 2005 edition at pp. xx–xxii; see also the important discussion of Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel, ‘Medievalisms Old and New: the Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies’, *AHR* 103 (1998), 677–704.

<sup>32</sup> As noted by Reuter, ‘Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?’ pp. 23–5. For a somewhat more optimistic view of the distinctive characteristics of the Middle Ages, see J. H. Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 21–2.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Editorial’, *EME* 1 (1992), 1–2, at 1; cf. the current masthead, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14680254>.

end.<sup>34</sup> He preferred fluid, fuzzy periodisation and gradual shifts (even if punctuated by events) rather than epochs differentiated by personalities or high politics, and in this respect, was remarkably ahead of his time.

Even if notable events, such as the ‘fall’ of the western Roman empire or, in the case of Britain, the withdrawal of the legions in 410 CE can be taken as the start of the early Middle Ages, its end cannot be pinpointed so precisely, at least on the Continent. (In England, of course, the Norman Conquest has for centuries functioned as a marker of periodisation.) Numerous different master-narratives have tried to place a break somewhere between the ninth and twelfth centuries, using empirical and conceptual methods, and relying variously on economic, ecclesiastical, institutional, or statist arguments.<sup>35</sup> Each necessarily rests on its author’s own methodological preferences, conception of the critical drivers of change in past societies, and geographical area of main expertise. No position neatly aligns with any of the others, leaving students entitled to feel a degree of bewilderment. Instead, some historians who prefer to think in terms of rounded centuries, as Wallace-Hadrill did, have identified the turn of the millennium as a key to debates about periodisation. The Marxist Guy Bois located the transition from the ancient to the feudal mode of production around the year one thousand, while R. I. Moore used it as the springboard for Europe’s ‘first revolution’; most recently, Valerie Hansen has pegged the beginnings of globalisation to 1000 CE.<sup>36</sup>

I doubt whether Wallace-Hadrill would have had much time for any of these propositions. In identifying the eleventh century as a beginning that did not mark an end, he was paying indirect homage to his predecessor’s vision of eleventh-century pioneers creating a new civilization. His inability to identify any clean beginning was a nod to Peter Brown and to the crumbling of the boundaries between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In 1872, when a separate degree in Modern History was established at Oxford, the University had famously defined the Modern History syllabus as beginning in 476 CE.<sup>37</sup> A century later, in 1971, Brown published *The World of Late Antiquity* while still based in Oxford. Originally subtitled from *Marcus Aurelius to Muhammed*, it gave intellectual coherence and a name to a period that had hitherto fallen down the crevasse between Classics and History. Peter Brown later recalled that, for several years he had been actively waging a ‘dogged *guerrilla* against the dominant, melodramatic notion of the decline and fall of the Roman empire’.<sup>38</sup> Those skirmishes

<sup>34</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, ‘Early Medieval History’, pp. 14–15. The eleventh century as a ‘beginning’ points to the closing words of Southern’s *The Making of the Middle Ages* as cited above, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> C. West offers a succinct and trenchant overview of influential recent ones in *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation between Marne and Moselle, c. 800–c. 1100* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 1–9.

<sup>36</sup> G. Bois, *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: the Village of Lournand from Antiquity to Feudalism*, trans. J. Birrell (Manchester, 1992) [French original, *La mutation de l’an mil. Lournand, village mâconnais de l’Antiquité au féodalisme* (Paris, 1989)]; R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution c. 970–1215* (Oxford, 2000); V. Hansen, *The Year 1000: when Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began* ([London], 2020).

<sup>37</sup> R. N. Soffer, ‘Modern History’, *The History of the University of Oxford, VII: Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, pt 2 (Oxford, 2000), 361–84.

<sup>38</sup> P. R. L. Brown, ‘*The World of Late Antiquity Revisited*’, *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), 5–30, at 9.



were the birth pangs of 'Late Antiquity', a reordering of historical priorities that downplayed institutional and political ones. By promoting cultural and religious ones in their place, Late Antiquity encouraged a blurring of the traditional chronological, geographical, and cultural markers of periodisation. Brown has readily acknowledged the French and German intellectual antecedents of the expression 'Late Antiquity', but the book's evocation of a dynamic culture and multicolour society that banished chaos and minimised invasion was entirely his own.<sup>39</sup> Its geographical canvas too broke with convention, stretching as it did from Ireland to Iran. On inspection, however, Brownian late-ness did not banish the modern world from sight: as Andrea Giardina noticed, the book is 'a blend of modernity and exoticism' which used numerous analogies to anchor late antiquity firmly in similarities with the present. For Giardina, this meta-epochal arc does much to explain the 'expansionism' of Late Antiquity in recent scholarship.<sup>40</sup>

I had bought *The World of Late Antiquity* in my first year as an undergraduate. Its many illustrations enthralled me, but the text itself baffled.<sup>41</sup> It appeared on reading lists in the company of the likes of Samuel Dill, J. B. Bury, and A. H. M. Jones, but I could not fit it in to the framework which all the rest of my reading suggested.<sup>42</sup> But that, of course, was the point: its shattering of previous paradigms has endured, even though its reception has had critical elements. 'Early medieval history', with its absence of any 'clean beginning', has endured too, but the two remain in an awkward – at times frankly uncomfortable – relationship to each other. Late Antiquity typically privileges social, cultural, and religious history, and has a generous conception of an ancient world centred on the Mediterranean but embracing every form of contact with the later Roman empire, however indirect and tenuous, such as the presence of coins in India or pottery in western Scotland. It vies with Early Medieval for the contested territory of post-imperial western Europe, with or without inclusion of the British Isles. But whether early, high or late, the Middle Ages were – and arguably remain – essentially Eurocentric, deriving much of their valency from their central role in nineteenth-century nation-building enterprises.

For Wallace-Hadrill, the Middle Ages were not only European, they were also in essence Christian. In spite of his prevarication about the beginnings and

<sup>39</sup> Brown, 'World of Late Antiquity Revisited', pp. 10 and 17, on 'antiquité tardive' in the work of Henri-Irénée Marrou and 'Spätantike' (a term made current by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl in 1901); now also P. R. L. Brown, *Journeys of the Mind: a Life in History* (Princeton, 2023), esp. pp. 183–5. S. Rebenich, 'Late Antiquity in Modern Eyes', *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau (Chichester, 2009), pp. 77–92, outlines the main directions of relevant continental scholarship from the late nineteenth century, and summarises the significance of the work of Riegl at pp. 85–6.

<sup>40</sup> A. Giardina, 'L'esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi Storici* 40 (1999), 157–80, at 157–63, quotation at 163: 'un miscuglio di modernità e di esotismo'.

<sup>41</sup> On its illustrated aspect, see B. Ward-Perkins, 'The Making of The World of Late Antiquity', *Revista Diálogos Mediterrânicos* 21 (2021), 4–18.

<sup>42</sup> The flavour of reading lists when I started my undergraduate studies can be gauged from Edward James's 'Additional Bibliography for English Readers' appended to Lucien Musset, *The Germanic Invasions: the Making of Europe AD 400–600*, trans. E. James and C. James (London, 1975), first published as *Les invasions: les vagues germaniques* (Paris, 1965).

endings of the early Middle Ages, he nevertheless had absolute certainty on one point: 'The real beginning, for the historian, is the birth of Christ'.<sup>43</sup> By this, he meant more than merely dating by the Christian usage of the year of the incarnation, as is clear from the review he wrote in 1963 of L. A. Manyon's English translation of Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*. Much longer than most of his other numerous book reviews, it is a sustained, and at times combative, refutation of many of Bloch's key arguments.<sup>44</sup> The burden of the charge levelled against Marc Bloch was that 'he does not, and cannot, get at the heart of his [i.e. medieval] society. He is kept at, or near, the surface by his lack of understanding of its faith'.<sup>45</sup> Bloch was a secular, highly assimilated Jew of Alsatian origin whose Jewishness only became a serious issue when anti-semitism percolated the French academic world in the 1930s; Wallace-Hadrill will certainly have known of his death at the hands of the Gestapo in June 1944, for news of it immediately reached medieval historians in the UK.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Wallace-Hadrill's strictures drew on a feeling of dismay about the rapidly secularising nature of 1960s Britain; perhaps it was just an uncharacteristically ill-considered verdict. Be that as it may, it is a judgement which shocks me every time I read it.

Whether early, central or late, the academic practice of medieval history has benefitted hugely from the increasing diversity of the academic community. Similarly, medievalists' responses to the wider shifts, trends and fashions of historical scholarship have greatly enriched the field. The changed title of this journal exemplifies one that peculiarly affects the Insular world. The recognition that English history cannot be treated in isolation from the rest of the island of Britain, and indeed from what Pocock christened 'the Atlantic archipelago' of which it is but the largest single island, fostered historiographical reappraisals from the 1970s onwards, with early modern historians in the vanguard.<sup>47</sup> Historians of the early medieval Insular world moved much more slowly in this direction for numerous reasons, not least because they face the challenge of the high level of philological skills needed to juggle Latin, Old English, Brittonic and Gaelic sources. For this reason, if none other, the shift from *Anglo-Saxon England* to *Early Medieval England and its Neighbours* is welcome: trail-blazing monographs such as those of Robin Fleming and Caroline Brett offer a benchmark of what the wider geographical perspective enables.<sup>48</sup>

There is no room here to review all the many other recent historiographical currents which have brought new perspectives to the early Middle Ages both

<sup>43</sup> 'Early Medieval History', p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> *EHR*, 78 (1963), 116–21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 117.

<sup>46</sup> C. Fink, *Marc Bloch: a Life in History* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 14–17, 175–87; M. M. Postan, 'Marc Bloch: an Obituary Note', *EconHR* 14 (1944), 161–2.

<sup>47</sup> See the clarion call of J. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: a Plea for a New Subject', *New Zealand Jnl of Hist.* 8 (1974), 3–21 (reprinted in his *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 24–43). See also Ian McBride, 'J. G. A. Pocock and the Politics of British History', *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History: a (Dis)United Kingdom?* eds. N. Lloyd-Jones and M. M. Scull (London, 2018), pp. 33–57, and Naismith, 'The Anglo-Saxons', p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> R. Fleming, *Britain after Rome: the Fall and Rise, 400–1070* (London, 2010); C. Brett, with F. Edmonds and P. Russell, *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago, 450–1200: Contact, Myth and History* (Cambridge, 2022).

Insular and Continental: linguistic, gender, material, environmental, post-modern, post-human, queer, and so forth. There is one which is sufficiently thought-provoking that it needs comment, however: the recent global ‘turn’. Two strands of scholarship matter in this context. One emphasises that there was a coherent ‘Eurasian Late Antiquity’, characterised by new linkages, beliefs and politics stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to east Asia.<sup>49</sup> The other has destabilising consequences. Reliant on the proposition that comparison is as much a mode of global history as connectivity, this version takes an even more geographically expansive framework and sails under the flag of the ‘Global Middle Ages’.<sup>50</sup> In consequence of its geographical distension, the European-ness of the term Middle Ages has come under scrutiny. On the one hand, post-colonial critiques implicate medieval-ness in the power dynamics of the colonial order.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the Middle Ages has now become ‘an albatross of a term’.<sup>52</sup> On the other, at least in the Anglosphere, scholars of other continents are often content to appropriate ‘the Middle Ages’ as a neutral term because it enables them to key in to wider debates and reach wider audiences.<sup>53</sup> But these debates do not touch *early* medieval-ness. Early-ness remains unaffected; only middle-ness is an issue.<sup>54</sup>

In this respect, there is an important contrast with early modernity, at least as conceived by Alan Strathern, global historian of the early modern era. Among the numerous points made in his nuanced and incisive critique of the notion of a global Middle Ages, Strathern makes explicit that extending the temporal compass of global history to embrace the Middle Ages elides questions of periodisation. This leads him to two observations of especial relevance here: that early modernity looks as much backwards as forwards, and that in a global context, as distinct from a European one, it can be turned around to ‘ambush’ and destabilise the conventional grand narrative of European expansion into the Americas and South Asia.<sup>55</sup> Specifically *early* modernity, Strathern argues, opens up a space for acknowledging the dynamism and power structures of non-western societies prior to the nineteenth century, and in so doing, it undermines traditional notions of Eurocentric cultural hegemony and pushes back against

<sup>49</sup> *Empire and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran and the Steppe, ca. 250–750*, ed. N. di Cosmo and M. Maas (Cambridge, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> *The Global Middle Ages*, ed. C. Holmes and N. Standen (Oxford, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> C. Holmes and N. Standen, ‘Introduction: towards a Global Middle Ages’, *The Global Middle Ages*, pp. 1–44, esp. 15–16.

<sup>52</sup> N. Berend, ‘Interconnection and Separation: Medieval Perspectives on the Modern Problem of the “Global Middle Ages”’, *Med. Encounters* 29 (2023), 285–314, at 290.

<sup>53</sup> Two examples, both by north American scholars: *Caravans of Gold, Fragments of Time: Art, Culture and Exchange across the Medieval Sahara*, ed. K. B. Berzock (Princeton, 2019); C. Laffin, ‘Histories of Periodization: Demarcations, Blurred Boundaries and New Perspectives’, *Interdisciplinary Edo: toward an Integrated Approach to Early Modern Japan*, ed. J. Schlachet and W. C. Hedberg (Abingdon, 2024), pp. 199–217. I am grateful to the author for sharing the latter with me in advance of publication.

<sup>54</sup> Its interstitial nature has been reinscribed by B. Kedar and M. Wiesner-Hanks, who have styled the period from 500 CE–1500 CE as the ‘Middle Millennium’: *The Cambridge World History, V: Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict 500 CE–1500 CE* (Cambridge, 2015), 1 and *passim*.

<sup>55</sup> A. Strathern, ‘Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before’, *Global Middle Ages*, ed. Holmes and Standen, pp. 317–44, at 322–3, 328.

over-generalised definitions of modernity itself. Early Medieval-ness lacks equivalent vigour however. On the one hand, it cannot readily face both ways. As construed in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the early Middle Ages provided an origin point – commonly the main origin point – for European nationhood.<sup>56</sup> Prior to this era, so the argument ran, lay primeval conditions and an absence of ‘civilisation’. In this sense, the early Middle Ages are both foundational and quintessentially European. Even when early medievalists do attempt to face backwards, they are constrained by the encounter with Late Antiquity and the need to wrestle for intellectual mastery of the western European landmass in the centuries between c. 400 CE and 700 CE. On the other hand, early-ness offers no critique of either medieval-ness *per se*, nor of European-ness. ‘Early medieval’ springs no methodological trap for unwary students of subsequent centuries. In short, its heuristic capacity is much weaker than that of early modernity. It remains embedded in the ‘pre-’.

How might we, as early medievalists, respond to that? We certainly cannot circumvent it. Nor, I submit, should we ignore it by burying our heads in the sands of our own narrow specialisms. Rather, we should make a virtue of it. We could be much more assertive in recognising that Early Medieval has such a weak relationship to modernity precisely because of its combination of middle-ness and early-ness and thus insist upon its analytic vigour in studies of the human past. We could exploit its teleological weakness to participate in debates with our early modernist and modernist colleagues and challenge their strong tendency to ignore the world prior to c. 1750, or even 1800 – just as some late medievalists have done.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, we could join methodological debates within the historical profession, such as that surrounding ‘presentism’.<sup>58</sup> We could insist that the early Middle Ages are not pre-modern but, in a nod to Bruno Latour, non-modern.<sup>59</sup> Anthropologists and sociologists too might benefit from recognising that non-modernity can be accessed obliquely in the historical record. We could fold it into teaching to insist upon the complexity and non-linearity of change over time and to demonstrate that, though periodisation is often laden with value-judgements, it is neither an analytical tool nor a mode of explanation. The early Middle Ages are surely a crucial reminder that ‘Europe’ itself is a historical construct, one whose formative processes were long and complex.

Readers of this journal do not need to be reminded that the controversy surrounding usage of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ demonstrates, among other things, that the non-modern past continues to exercise a grip on the contemporary world in ways that can at times be noxious. And there are others – not readers of this or any journal devoted to the Middle Ages – who see the Middle Ages as a homogenised, static whole, one to ignore or romanticise at will. Such folk have

<sup>56</sup> P. J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: the Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002); Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* pp. 16–20.

<sup>57</sup> For example C. Symes, ‘When we Talk about Modernity’, *AHR* 116 (2011), 715–26; B. van Bavel, *The Invisible Hand? How Markets and Economies have Emerged and Declined since AD 500* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, A. Walsham et al., ‘Viewpoints: Presentism’, *Past & Present* 234 (2017), 213–89.

<sup>59</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), first published in French, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris, 1991). Symes, ‘When we Talk about Modernity’ preferred ‘un-Modern’, which has connotations of un-doing.

little awareness of the dynamism and complexity of the distant past or its persistent entanglement with contemporary Europe. As the popularity of the Middle Ages among university students continues to wane, perhaps the most important reason of all for paying attention to early medieval history is, quite simply, this: that it enables us to confront head-on those facile assumptions that limit the 'relevance' of the past to the century and a half since the Franco-Prussian War. Whether we turn our attention to the pageantry of British coronation rituals or more profound but less eye-catching subjects such as marriage, slavery, colonisation, land usage, and so much more besides, early medieval history brings the opportunity to insist that to explain is not to condone. That, surely, is reason enough to fight the drift into obsolescence.<sup>60</sup>

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