

Problems with Continuity: Defining the Middle Ages for Medievalism Studies

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As can be seen in almost any field of academia, continuity and its antitheses are deceptively difficult to define. Mathematicians have long struggled to pin down a real-number continuum that can do the work required by limit theory.¹ Literary critics continue to grapple with the relationship between narrative flow and the changes that lend it momentum.² And scholars from many areas of the humanities and social sciences have attempted to clarify the blurred distinctions between historical continuity and discontinuity.³

This elusiveness is particularly problematic for medievalism studies, whose subjects are often described as post-medieval responses to the Middle Ages.⁴ Periods are rarely recognized by those living through them and are almost never, if ever, characterized twice in precisely the same way.⁵ This seems to be especially true of the Middle Ages, as is indicated by the plethora of later, mostly derogatory labels for them, including “Middle Ages,” “Dark Ages,” and “A World Lit Only by Fire.”⁶ Indeed, defining the Middle Ages gave rise to and

¹ For more on this discussion, begin with Benjamin Lee Buckley, *The Continuity Debate: Dedekind, Cantor, du Bois-Reymond, and Peirce on Continuity and Infinitesimals* (Boston: Do-cent Press, 2008).

² See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984-88; orig. *Temps et Récit*, 1981-85).

³ See, for example, the Harvard economist Alexander Gerschenkron, “On the Concept of Continuity in History,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106/3 (29 June 1962): 195-209.

⁴ See, for example, the mission statement in the foretexts of every volume of *Studies in Medievalism*, which claims this publication “provides an interdisciplinary medium of exchange for scholars in all fields [. . .] concerned with any aspect of the post-medieval idea and study of the Middle Ages and the influence, both scholarly and popular, of this study on Western society after 1500.” For a volume of case studies on the relationship of continuity to medievalism, see *Resonances: Historical Essays on Continuity and Change*, ed. Nils Holger Petersen, Eyolf Østrem, and Andreas Bücker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

⁵ For more on the parsing of history begin with *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Garland, 1996), esp. the title essay by Besserman, 3-28.

⁶ The etymology of the label “Middle Ages” seems to begin with the Latin phrase “media tempestas” (middle season), which, as Angelo Mazzocco notes on page 112 of *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), had appeared in print by 1469. Among the many early variants on this idea, “media aevum” (middle age) appeared by 1604, and “media saecula” (middle ages) appeared by 1625, as noted by Martin Albrow in *The Global Age: State and Society beyond Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 205. The concept of a Dark Age (“tenebras”) apparently originated with Petrarch and was recorded by him in 1341 as part of condemning late Latin literature relative to that of classical antiquity. The term “Dark Ages” derives from the Latin “saeculum obscurum,” which Caesar Baronius applied in 1602 to the period between the end of the Carolin-

continues to fuel much of the broader debate over whether and how to divide the past into periods.⁷

Since at least the fourteenth century, many scholars have agreed that the Middle Ages began after Antiquity, but these same writers have often disagreed on the precise caesura between the two periods. Petrarch, who in 1341 became the first writer to date the origins of the “tenebras,” is no more specific than the fall of Rome, as he locates the Middle Ages after “*storia antica*” and into the “*storia nova*” of his own time.⁸ Leonardo Bruni, who began his *Historiarum Florentini Populi* in 1415 and finished it just two years before his death in 1444, began a long tradition of dating the end of Antiquity and the start of the Middle Ages to 476, when Odoacer drove the last of the western emperors, Romulus Augustus, from power.⁹ And others have dated the divide to the

gian Empire in 888 and the beginning of the Gregorian Reform under Pope Clement II in 1046. The first English appearance of a related term, “darker ages,” is found in Gilbert Burnet’s 1679 “Epistle Dedicatory” to the first volume of his *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*. And by the 1720s, the term “Dark Ages” for at least a portion of the period between Antiquity and the Renaissance was in common usage. As for the phrase “A World Lit Only by Fire,” it comes from the title of William Manchester’s enormously popular survey of the Middle Ages (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1992).

⁷ This may be most evident in the discussions that have grown out of the continuity thesis, which holds that the intellectual development of the Middle Ages continued uninterrupted through what many of its defenders call the Renaissance and/or early modern period. For major landmarks in the discussion, begin with Pierre Duhem’s *Le système du monde: histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, 10 vols. (Paris: A Hermann, 1913), and see George Sarton’s *The History of Science and the New Humanism* (New York: H. Holt, 1931); James Franklin, “The Renaissance Myth,” *Quadrant* 26 (11) (Nov. 1982): 51-60; Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Gary Hatfield, “Was the Scientific Revolution Really a Revolution of Science?” in *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation: Proceedings of Two Conferences on Pre-modern Science Held at the University of Oklahoma*, ed. F. Jamil Ragep and Sally P. Ragep, with Steven Livesey (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 489-525; and Arun Bala, *The Dialogue of Civilizations in the Birth of Modern Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For a broader discussion of periodizing the Middle Ages, begin with *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory*, ed. Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), esp. Cole and Smith’s introductory essay, “Outside Modernity,” 1-38, and Kathleen Davis’s “The Sense of an Epoch: Periodization, Sovereignty, and the Limits of Secularization,” 39-69. They and their fellow authors in this collection resist texts such as *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983; orig. *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 1966), in which Hans Blumenberg argues that the “modern age” is a complete departure from the Middle Ages.

⁸ See 4:28-29 in the 24 books of his *Le Familiari*, ed. and trans. Ugo Dotti, 5 vols. (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1991-2009). For more on this issue, begin with Theodor E. Mommsen’s classic article, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” *Speculum* 17/2 (Apr. 1942): 226-42.

⁹ For an English edition of Bruni’s text, see *History of the Florentine People*, trans. James Hankins, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001-7), and for the specific reference to 476 as the end of Antiquity, see page xvii in volume 1 of that edition. For a general introduction to this and related topics, and for outstanding examples of enduring prejudice towards the “Dark Ages,” see Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), esp. 86.

death of Majorian in 461, the sack of Rome in 455, the death of Aetius in 454, the death of Constantius III in 421, the sack of Rome in 410, the execution of Stilicho in 408, the Germanic tribes crossing the Rhine in 406, the death of Theodosius I in 395, the Battle of Adrianople in 378, and even the accession of Diocletian in 284.¹⁰

Alois Riegl and some of his Austrian contemporaries, on the other hand, began to argue in the late nineteenth century that there was a “Spätantike” during which the Classical period and the Middle Ages overlapped.¹¹ And this theory gained great currency in the 1960s and 1970s when Peter Brown and other Anglo-American scholars promoted it as an antidote to residual periodization by such texts as R. W. Southern’s *The Making of the Middle Ages*, which was published in 1953 and attracted a huge following.¹²

But Riegl, Brown, and their colleagues also disagree about the nature and duration of the periods they are discussing. For example, while Brown dates the Late Antique from 150 CE to 750 CE, Averil Cameron dates it from 395 CE to 700 CE, and Bertrand Lançon dates it from 312 CE to 604 CE.¹³ And where Riegl sees it as embodied in a slow morphology of artistic style best judged by posterity, Cameron, Lançon, and many others find symptoms of it in contemporaneous comments on such major events as Constantine’s defeat of Maxentius in 312 CE.¹⁴

Nor is there consensus on precisely how and when the Middle Ages ended, if indeed they have.¹⁵ As we saw, Petrarch presents himself as part of a new history but one that has not entirely shed post-Antique barbarity. And while Bruni maintains that he is part of a new era that has recovered from Petrarch’s

¹⁰ For a survey of sources on these and 200 other theories about the collapse of Antiquity (and the rise of the Middle Ages), see Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (Munich: Beck, 1984).

¹¹ Perhaps Riegl’s most famous publication related to this topic is *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, 2 vols. (Vienna: K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1901), which has since been translated by Rolf Winkes as *Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985).

¹² For Peter Brown’s most influential publications in this area, see his *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) and *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), which was an obvious response to Southern. For more on the historiography of “Late Antiquity,” begin with Glen W. Bowersock, “The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49/8 (May 1996): 29-43, and Andrea Giardana, “Esplosione di tardoantico,” *Studi storici* 40/1 (Jan. - Mar. 1999): 157-80.

¹³ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*; Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395-700* (1993; 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2012); and Bertrand Lançon, *Rome dans l’Antiquité tardive: 312-604 après J.-C.* (Paris: Hachette, 1995).

¹⁴ As indicated by the dates in his title, Lançon is one of the authors who sees Late Antiquity beginning with the defeat of Maxentius.

¹⁵ For more on this issue, see the sources listed above in note 7, especially the essays by Davis and by Cole and Smith in *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*. Also, see Lee Patterson’s defense of periodization, “The Place of the Modern in the late Middle Ages,” in *The Challenge of Periodization*, 51-66.

“tenebras,” the explicit treatment of that recovery as a rebirth of Antiquity had to await the first edition of Giorgio Vasari’s *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* (1550), which describes art from Giotto (1266/67-1337) to Michelangelo (1475-1564) as a “rinascita.”¹⁶ Subsequent historians then built on this concept, particularly in 1855 when Jules Michelet called the fifteenth-century interest in man a “renaissance.”¹⁷ But as Michelet’s differences with Vasari suggest, many scholars disagree on exactly when the Renaissance began and what it covered. Even in the case of Italy, which is most often and most confidently assigned a renaissance, the beginning of that period and the end of the Middle Ages are not easily linked to a single quick and dramatic event, such as those often associated with the end of Antiquity.¹⁸ And trends often seen as symptoms and/or causes of the Renaissance, such as the rise of humanism, are difficult to track in and of themselves (much less as markers of an epochal shift), for even when we have comparatively great evidence about them, it often indicates wide variation in practices and perceptions.¹⁹ Indeed, one of the traits most frequently associated with the Renaissance, self-awareness, is so hard to define, so diverse in its manifestations, and so integral to the human condition that particular examples of it often reveal little more than the immediate circumstances from which they arise.²⁰

These challenges have recently led many historians to drop the appellation “renaissance” in favor of far broader phrases such as “post-medieval” and “early modern” or more overtly chronological terms such as “quattrocento.”²¹ And some scholars have started to argue against even those (or any other) divisions of the past.²² While raising many of the aforementioned objections to

¹⁶ Bruni, *History*, esp. 1:xvii, and Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1885-1906), which is widely available in translation, most notably that by Gaston du C. De Vere in 10 volumes (London: Macmillan and the Medici Society, 1912-15).

¹⁷ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 11 vols. (1855-67; repr. Lausanne: Éd. Rencontre, 1967).

¹⁸ See the sources in note 7 above. Also see *The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. André Chastel (London: Methuen, 1982), and *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Treadgold (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984). And for more recent, albeit more narrow or more oblique, discussions and bibliographies on this subject, see Aldo Scaglione’s “The Periodization of the Renaissance and the Question of Mannerism,” in *The Challenge of Periodization*, 95-106, and Albert Russell Ascoli, *A Local Habitation and a Name: Imagining Histories in the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ For a broad and widely available introduction to many historical manifestations of humanism, begin with *The Cambridge Companion to Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁰ See, for example, the variations that appear in Joanna Woods-Marsden’s *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), and Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), even as the authors attempt to define patterns in the construction of identity.

²¹ For further study in this area, begin with Randolph Starn’s “A Postmodern Renaissance?” *Renaissance Quarterly* 60/1 (Spring 2007): 1-24, and Besserman’s title essay in *The Challenge of Periodization*, 3-28.

²² *Ibid.* Also see *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*.

periodization in general, they have specified that all such partitions are biased and based on an incomplete historical record.²³ And they have noted that much of contemporary culture, such as attempts at chivalry, dates back to the Middle Ages.²⁴ Indeed in arguing for the continuity of history, some of these scholars have even joined popular pundits in characterizing entire regions of the contemporary world as “medieval.”²⁵

Of course, in some of these instances, the Middle Ages are employed as nothing more than a synonym for crudeness and barbarity.²⁶ But even those inaccurate and derogatory references perform a service, for they foreground the difficulty in defining the Middle Ages not only chronologically but also geographically.²⁷ And these challenges in determining whether, say, twenty-first-century Mali is medieval and, if so, similar to, say, fifth-century France return us to questions that cannot be answered in any uniformly logical or, I would argue, otherwise universally satisfactory manner: on what criteria do we base our divisions of the past? how do we assess the evidence for those criteria, particularly given its inevitable lacunae and distortions? who is qualified to make such decisions? who is qualified to choose who makes such decisions? and so forth.²⁸

Yet, while these questions may not be answerable for our field as a whole, I do not believe we have to ignore them or to cease identifying ourselves as scholars of medievalism. Instead, we can approach each project as an opportunity to actively defend our subjects as post-medieval. We can take a more self-conscious tack than has often been the case and directly argue that our subjects respond to a pre-modern, post-ancient milieu, that they comment on a world at least somewhat alien to Homer, Shakespeare, and us.

²³ Ibid, especially *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*. For resistance to this school of thought, see Patterson, “The Place of the Modern.”

²⁴ See especially *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*, and much of the work in *Studies in Medievalism*, particularly the essays defining neomedievalism for volumes 19 (2010) and 20 (2011). Also see *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*, ed. Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2012).

²⁵ These issues were directly raised by Karl Fugelso in “Medievalism from Here,” in *Studies in Medievalism 17: Defining Medievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 86-91, and they were addressed at least in passing by more than one subsequent essay in that serial, especially Amy S. Kaufman’s “Medieval Unmoored” and Lauryn S. Mayer’s “Dark Matters and Slippery Words: Grappling with Neomedievalism(s),” both of which appeared in *Studies in Medievalism 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 1-11 and 68-76, respectively.

²⁶ Examples of such treatment, especially in popular culture, abound, perhaps most famously a villain’s claim in the film *Pulp Fiction* (Miramax et al.), which was directed by Quentin Tarantino, that he is going to “get medieval” in torturing his enemy.

²⁷ For more on geographical issues in periodization, begin with J. H. Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” *American Historical Review* 101/3 (June 1996): 749-70.

²⁸ For more on this, see Fugelso, “Medievalism from Here.”

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