



# Medieval Europe

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## **Medieval Europe** Chris Wickham

The millennium between the breakup of the western Roman Empire and the Reformation was a long and hugely transformative period—one not easily chronicled within the scope of a few hundred pages. Yet distinguished historian Christopher Wickham has taken up the challenge in this landmark book, and he succeeds in producing the most riveting account of medieval Europe in a generation.

Tracking the entire sweep of the middle ages across Europe, Wickham focuses on important changes century by century, including such pivotal crises and moments as the fall of the western Roman Empire, Charlemagne's reforms, the feudal revolution, the challenge of heresy, the destruction of the Byzantine Empire, the rebuilding of late medieval states, and the appalling devastation of the Black Death. He provides illuminating vignettes that underscore how shifting social, economic, and political circumstances affected individual lives and international events. Wickham offers both a new conception of Europe's medieval period and a provocative revision of exactly how and why the Middle Ages matter.

## **Medieval Europe Details**

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Author : Chris Wickham

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# From Reader Review Medieval Europe for online ebook

## Justina says

Any work that seeks to wrap up a millennium of history across Europe would understandably face the same challenge - the tension between generalization and specificity, which is evident throughout the book. To Wickham's credit, he tenaciously and conspicuously battles the temptation to generalize, by often summarizing the histories of various European polities in different periods, and by emphasizing the differences among them. At the same time, in each chapter, he still manages to lay out the structural themes of the period. Still, for a beginner in European history, this book perhaps leans a bit heavily on the former: the polity-by-polity summaries can feel a bit rushed and lifeless, partly also owing to a rather flat and matter-of-fact writing style. Wickham also quite often disputes common modern interpretations, which, again to a beginner (and non-European), can at times feel a bit digressive if you are not already aware of the historiographical discussions. Still, this book stands out for its nuanced discussion of structural themes, especially its chapter on women, and determined refusal to subscribe to simple theories.

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## Ada says

I suppose I came to Chris Wickham's Medieval Europe with the wrong expectations. It's tempting to see history as the deeds of men and women, related by chroniclers. I do not mean necessarily the deeds of kings and queens, but those of knights, townsmen or common peasants. In the writing of Chris Wickham, all these individuals are merely units to be aggregated to envisage the the economic and the sociological trends of the age.

This makes for rather dry reading – even if the subject is ambitious and fascinating. For the author's aim is nothing less than a complete overview of the history of Europe's Middle Ages. His argument focuses on the divide between the Roman South and the Barbarian North throughout the period – and even up to the 18th century. He points to centralised government power and reliable taxation as hallmarks of Roman influence, and he talks length about the Visigoths in Spain and the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires in the East as continuing the Roman tradition.

But despite all of Wickham's study and learning, the book remains a rather difficult read. The use of primary sources is scarce, there is no chronological table for the reader's reference, and the author never refers to the plates with images which appear in the book (making me suspect that these were inserted by a publisher in a haphazard manner as tangentially related to the subject matter, rather than designed as an integral part of the book).

If you are reading about the middle ages for pleasure, I would highly recommend Christopher de Hamel's book on medieval manuscripts instead. Reach for Wickham's book only if you are determined to plough through a lot of facts with only socioeconomic theories holding them together. Or, alternately, if you just want to see that lovely cover on your bookshelf.

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## Tariq Mustafa says

Medieval Europe has so influenced so much of our current world that it must be explored in depth. This book is not a straight chronological simple history of what happened before and what happened after it. Rather, the author has focused on the reasons and factors of European reformation from the ashes of the Roman empires.

The author's flow of writing is surprisingly riveting for a subject like Medieval European history. Subsequent reading of other books around the European history and historic debates are given a more luminous understanding after having read this work by Mr. Wickham.

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## Adam Marischuk says

"Wickham is the most ambitious and provocative of medieval historians" (Peter Thonemann, TLS)

"Fascinating, judicious, authoritative" (Paul Freedman, Yale)

"Writing with great wit, style and clarity" (John Arnold, Cambridge)

"a model of clarity and accessibility...that remains compelling throughout...engages his reader in his arguments, choices and interpretations and keeps them on their toes" (Mayke de Jong, Utrecht)

These are just some of the raving reviews found on the dust jacket of this incredibly dry book. It sometimes made me wonder if I had actually bought a book with a different dust jacket.

Not that there is anything wrong with the book. It is, to repeat Paul Freedman, 'judicious' in the sense of having careful judgements, there is nothing groundbreaking, shocking or even mildly exciting. It is the classic case of academic writing being so guarded that conclusions are omitted and neutrality preserved at all costs. This is the Switzerland of history books: "in Italy for 30 years, under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love. They had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock!" (Graham Greene, *The Third Man*)

But the book is judicious in another way. It is so focused on government (and nearly all government function in the Middle Ages was judicial, aside from war) and other major trends are only given a rather superficial treatment, especially the Church (and the associated Crusades, Inquisition, Cathars, Mendicants) and the economic scope is limited to "government" function (Kings and aristocrats).

The book begins with the necessary but mundane discussion of what constitutes the Medieval period, and adds nothing earth-shattering which would alter the traditional 500-1500 framework; despite Professor Wickham's continuous reminders that "Europe" in the "Middle Ages" was not uniform, either across geography or chronology.

Then Professor Wickham spends the next ten chapters discussing what amounts to the fact that as taxation grows, so does government. In the early period, fiscal taxation was rarer than payment in kind to the local lord (with the exception of Byzantium and Umayyad Spain). This lack of fiscal prowess by western lords retarded the growth of the government and centralization of power. Which is clearly a bad thing for Wickham despite his 11th hour protest in penultimate chapter "It must be stressed that this is a structural conclusion, not a moral judgement. The view that a rich and autocratic king, who extracts a lot of money from his subjects, is somehow 'better' (even worse, more 'modern') than a king who has to face a powerful

aristocracy cannot be justified in any sensible way" (p.233)

Professor Wickham is at his best discussing Eastern Europe, where he allows the narrative to flow. His schoolboy crush on Byzantium does not unfairly alter the chapter on it, but he offers little evidence to support his simultaneous enamourment with Muslim Spain. But the Catholic Church, papal power, monasticism and the rise of the mendicant orders is given short shrift. This could be forgiven if the book wasn't so focused on the rise of central government, which is intricately linked to Vatican bureaucracy, the inquisitorial judicial system and centralism in power delegation.

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## **John says**

A textbook on how to suck all the life and juice out of a rich and fascinating topic. Maybe it's just that the reader sounds like he's having a hard time staying awake--but more likely it's the author's focus on large social trends and economic generalities that left me totally not caring that my loan period (borrowed it from the library) ran out before reaching the end.

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## **Brian says**

As Chris Wickham states in the introduction, this is an interpretation rather than a comprehensive account of European history between 500 and 1500. Exploring the processes whereby the monolithic structure of the Roman empire transformed into the multifarious polities of Western Europe, he focuses on a series of key moments of change. These he identifies as the fall of the western empire, the eastern empire's confrontation with Islam, the Carolingian experiment, the expansion of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, the reconstruction of political and religious power in the twelfth to the thirteenth centuries, the eclipse of Byzantium, the Black Death, the development of state structures in the fourteenth century and the emergence of wider popular engagement with the public sphere in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Wickham is a subtle thinker but, as a writer he is no great stylist e.g.

"The Bulgarian khaganate which had stabilised itself inside imperial borders in the late seventh century, when it faced more effective aggression from Constantinople in the mid-ninth century than it had before, recognised the need to adopt Byzantine styles of ruling to survive, and accepted Christianity in 865, much as the Poles did a century later, as we have seen."

For a lay-reader, the text can be hard going at times and the narrative is not always easy to follow; but that's as much to do with Wickham's determination to avoid a teleological approach as it is to with his style. He is very clear that the Middle Ages was not heading inevitably towards the Renaissance, or the Reformation, or modernity. Nor, on the other hand, was it simply a swirling pattern of events. There were processes of disintegration, transformation and reconstruction at work here. There were cultural and economic currents that sometimes assisted and sometimes impeded the transformation. Wickham refuses to ignore those elements of the period that run counter to the overall movement of events, seeking to incorporate them instead into a more complex picture

Personally, I found it interesting to observe the impact of the movement away from a universal system of taxation as it had been conducted in the Roman empire, towards a series of much less powerful polities built

around revenues derived from the personal land ownership of an individual monarch, and the eventual return to taxation, driven largely by the need to finance warfare. But this is merely to pick out one small element from Wickham's narrative. There are many other equally fascinating threads running through it, such as the conflict between ecclesiastical and secular power, or the changing roles of serfs, peasants, women and dissenters.

Indeed, there is much more in this book than can be gleaned from a preliminary reading. Authoritative and nuanced Wickham's survey views the Middle Ages as neither the end of antiquity nor the beginning of the early modern era but as a period in its own right with its own defining characteristics.

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### **Michael says**

Covers a thousand years and a huge geographic tapestry in a surprisingly brisk treatment. Bracingly no-nonsense and occasionally contrarian, but Wickham plays fair and lets you know when he's submitting a minority report. A lot of the popular stories of the middle ages, defenestrations and royal eccentricities and the like, are conspicuous by their absence, but Wickham is probably correct in thinking that just because something is famous and well documented doesn't necessarily mean it was all that important.

I'm surprised that many GR reviews found it a dull text -- I thought it was pretty zippy by any fair large-canvas standard. I learned a lot. What more could you ask for?

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### **Iana says**

Not a bad book. But I learnt little. The analysis itself is interesting. And it does give an interesting bird's eye view of European developments. At the same time it lacks sufficient detail - so the story feels diluted. And it is also an unnecessarily painful read! Clearer, simpler sentences would have done the job too.

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### **Ross says**

This is the best book I have read yet on the Medieval Period. About half the book is the typical period history giving the reader the names and dates of hundreds of rulers and the wars that they fought. I have zero interest in these names and wars.

The other half of this book is about the culture and economy of the period from the year 500 to the year 1500, which is what I am interested in.

The big story here is that from 500 to 800 there is little growth and little is known, but in the next 300 years the population grew by an astounding 300%. The author tells us what is known about how that could happen. First is improved agricultural methods allowing a good part of the population to create towns where craftsmen made things, and trade developed across much of Europe, adding to the efficiency. And this improved efficiency of society allowed for the tremendous population growth.

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## **Chris Jaffe says**

So....why didn't I like this book more than I did.

It isn't just that I'm giving it a mere three stars. It's that I really like this author. Seven years ago I read his "Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages" about Europe from 400-1000 and thought it was fantastic. I got a lot out of it. This one? Well, there's good stuff here, but I can't say it made a big difference to me.

Two related issues explain it: 1) I know more than I did then, and 2) this book covers twice as many years in about half as many pages as the previous one did. When I picked up "Inheritance" it was because the early Medieval period was a weak spot. I didn't know much about it. As a result, that sucker really helped give me a much better understanding of that time period. In the last seven years, I've made a serious effort to bone up on it and so a definite law of diminishing returns kicks in. I am by know means any kind of leading expert, but a brief general history is only going to get me so far. Much of it was a refresher, or just polished in some details. Frankly, though, I'd need to look over my notes to figure out what I got out of the book, because off the top of my head, I don't recall. That's not a great sign.

Also, Wickham is clearly an academic writing - which I mean in the best and worst ways. In the best way because he knows his stuff in detail, and in the worst way because .... lordy, is this ever dry stuff to read. (I think that's related to why I'd have to look at my notes to see what I got out of it).

Not a bad book, but not one that did much for me.

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## **Ed Greening says**

I read for fun, and dreaded picking this up to continue the slog. I felt relieved every time I could get off the bus or metro and stop reading. Somewhere buried deep inside is a good book; thematically it is excellent, and the author has clearly done reams of research. But my God I have never been so bored reading a book before.

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## **Peter Mcloughlin says**

Straight forward history of the middle ages. A little dry had a hard time getting into it.

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## **Mary Catherine Pace says**

Well-organized study of Medieval Europe from an historian who is not a sexy modern-narrative-type historian. Wickham's scholarship is sound and no-nonsense, as befits a system-centered Marxist-trained historian, blessedly free of massive quaint anecdotal asides to distract the reader from the chronology and major conflicts and developments of the periods addressed in this concise history. His organizational and presentation skills are amazing, and he covers all of European Medieval history in a way that is both

memorable and extremely helpful. I picked up the audio version (with an absolutely fabulous reader) for a quick review of my own training in French history of the period, and found it to be an excellent survey. I will look to this historian for future historical reading.

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## **Brett says**

Short, but hard to finish. There isn't much detail, unsurprisingly for a 258 page book covering a thousand years of history, but generalities about political change from the Byzantine Empire to Scotland aren't really engaging.

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## **Heather says**

I have not read a solid overview of the time between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, and this book does an admiral job of providing a survey of the time period, with more detail on what used to be called the "dark ages" than I have come across. That said, it was quite a slog to get through, as much as I am interested in the information. The writing is overly cumbersome at times and hard to digest.

I would love to have him as a professor, though.

My favorite parts were the chapters on the early Middle Ages (formerly dark ages), and my favorite chapter was chapter 10 - defining society: gender and community in late medieval Europe. Sounds like a college class I never took.

I also found out I love Iceland.

Here are some random notes/quotes from chapter 10 that I want to remember:

Account on peasant thought worlds. Europe of Middle Ages has a myriad of different peasant societies, each with distinct value systems, which in the future might be, as so far they have not been, properly compared

Icelandic saga narrative - no form of government except regular assemblies.

On medieval Iceland:

The reason for this attention to character was that, in a relatively economically equal society like this one, personal strengths and weaknesses and reputation, could determine success and failure almost totally. This was a non aristocratic society whose self-representation was indeed aspirational, but here the aspiration was only in part focused on honor, for honor in such a society was available to nearly everyone if they had the character and skill to maintain it; p 204-205

But if there ever was a medieval society in which we know a great deal about individual identity it is Iceland, for particular reasons: because in this peasant environment it was individual character which determines success and failure, more completely than almost anywhere else in medieval Europe

Centralized power leads to hostility to out-groups



And the conclusion: the strength of local, cellular, politics, plus the extension of literate practices to ever-wider groups, plus a continuing high-equilibrium economic system, plus a newly intrusive state, made possible by taxation, communications, and once again literacy, helped to create political systems across Europe which allowed engagement, nearly everywhere. This marks the last century of the Middle Ages, not the supposedly late medieval features which mark so many textbooks: crisis, or anxiety, of the Renaissance, or a sense that the continent was, somehow, waiting for the reformation and European global conquest. And it is one of the main elements that the medieval period handed on to future generations.

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