

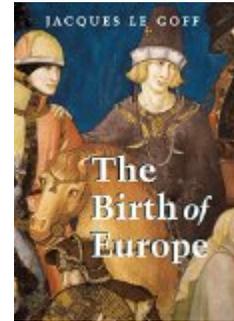
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jacques Le Goff. *The Birth of Europe*. Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. 274 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-22888-2; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-5682-0.

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## Europe and the Long Middle Ages

In *The Birth of Europe*, Jacques Le Goff makes the case for the Middle Ages as the period in which both the concept and reality of Europe were created. In doing so, he also addresses the issues of defining the characteristics of the Middle Ages and Europe, and of periodization within Western Civilization. Le Goff argues for the historical view of long periods of transitions, with “turning points and mutations” between antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era shaping what he terms the “Long Middle Ages” (p. 195). While precursors to Europe are evident in antiquity, Le Goff states that it is within this “Long Middle Ages” that Europe is firmly established in terms of its territorial orientation, diversity, and social character. With this discussion of the constructs of European time, space, and identity, Le Goff provides a valuable resource for both scholars and the interested general reader.

The author begins by providing his chronological schema for the stages of European development. This schema also provides the framework for the book, and allows Le Goff to build his argument logically and cohesively, summarizing several centuries of historical events and transitions. The chronology includes five stages of development stretching from the fourth century to the fifteenth century of the Common Era. The first stage spans the period from the Edict of Milan to the Merovingians. Le Goff characterizes this period as “Late Antiquity,” speaking to its transitional character, but also pointing to its essential part in the development of the concept of a Christian Europe. The Carolingian Renais-

sance, dating from the eighth to tenth centuries, is Le Goff’s second stage. He terms this an “aborted Europe” (as the title for chapter 2 succinctly states) that was distinctly Frankish. As such, he argues, it was also a “perverted Europe,” since it was contrary to Europe’s inherent diversity (p. 30). However, this period did provide fundamental features for the development of Europe, mainly elements of government that strove to unify Charlemagne’s empire.

It was between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, according to Le Goff, that Europe made its initial appearance and also firmly established its feudal character. In this chapter he provides a detailed picture of what he sees as the many general aspects of medieval Europe, including discussions of social structures, religious movements, the persecution of various sectors, and popular culture. Chapter 5 follows with a discussion of what he terms the “successes” of the Middle Ages (p. 99). These high points include increased urbanization, the revival of trade, and the growth in educational activity, especially within the universities.

Le Goff cites the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a period in which the earlier foundations of pre-European structures were severely shaken by famine, war, and disease. However, it is this period, he writes, that “reflected both a crisis in the general structures and growth of European society” (p. 154). Endemic violence, the Black Death, climatic changes, and subsequent famine on an unprecedented scale caused tremendous distress for

Europeans. This tension was exacerbated by the Great Schism within the Catholic Church, which undermined its ability to unify the populace. Yet equally important, Le Goff argues, was that this was also a period of great economic growth. In these years Europe became more “global” economically, culturally, and socially, providing the foundations that made the Renaissance possible.

According to Le Goff, the presences in the fifteenth century of such opposites as death and rebirth, inhibition and progress, provide important evidence arguing for a “medieval dynamism” (p. 199). Indeed, it was medieval Christianity that changed the historical outlook from cyclical to linear. Le Goff argues that the “Middle Ages despite their bad name, were in truth a period of inventions” and provided for the future progress and development of Europe (p. 200). Therefore the period be-

tween the Middle Ages and early modern Europe is much more fluid than scholars grant, as many basic elements of feudal Europe remained until the Industrial Revolution, lending credence to the view of a “Long Middle Ages.”

*The Birth of Europe* is an excellent resource, providing a clear and succinct overview of medieval European history. Le Goff also convincingly argues his case for the Middle Ages as the birth “place” of the modern notion and reality of Europe, and he contributes an interesting addition to the discussion of periodization within European history that would be beneficial to a student in the discipline. This work could also provide teachers with a useful framework upon which to develop a course at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and the accessibility of the work makes it suitable for the general reader with an interest in European history.

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