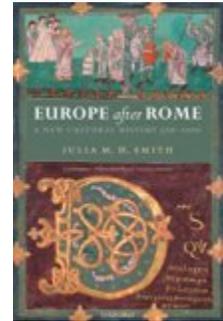


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julia M. H. Smith. *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History, 500-1000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiii + 384 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924427-0.

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A History for the New Europe

Julia M. H. Smith ends her book *Europe after Rome* with a discussion of a very different Europe, one that is emerging today from the debates forming the European Union and the movements to preserve regional cultures and pasts. This modern Europe, Smith argues, needs historical grounding, a past to which it can look for its present. Just as nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies looked for the origins of their own cultural and political structures in their historical narratives, present-day societies, Smith argues, should write histories that reflect twenty-first-century concerns. To this end, *Europe after Rome* describes the period from 500 to 1000 A.D. not as the last throes of a Roman Empire struggling with the introduction of “barbarian” cultures and peoples, nor as the birthplace of nation states and a universal Catholic Church. Smith’s early medieval period is instead characterized by localism, regional variations, and change occurring in varying times and places. Despite her stress on the diversity of experience, however, Smith also notes some general consistencies across all areas and throughout the period: the perceived inferiority of women, yet the importance of women in preserving and passing on culture; the generally low population gain in which bursts were offset by famines and diseases; and the agricultural basis of society rather than the urban-centered focus of the Roman Empire.

Foundational histories of the early Middle Ages, such as Henri Pirenne’s work on the economic consequences of the rise of Islam, argued that large forces or trends determined societies’ fates.[1] More recent treatments have stressed the political narrative, focusing especially on the

effects of the “barbarian invasions” on a decaying Roman Empire.[2] In fashioning this new description of the early medieval period, however, Smith turns away from both of these models, focusing instead on cultural theory, especially its emphasis on human agency. Her interest in the culture of the early Middle Ages, rather than economic or political trends, also determined her unusual organization, which is based on large themes rather than following a chronological progression. Each chapter tackles a different aspect of early medieval society, and for each she examines data from all over Europe and for the entire period. Although this approach creates a great deal of overlap from chapter to chapter, Smith tries to help the reader navigate through her notes, which point the reader to related sections throughout the book.

The book is divided into four sections, each comprising two chapters and containing several further subsections. The four sections deal with topics familiar to social and cultural historians: “Fundamentals” looks at modes of communication (writing and speaking), issues of demography (climate, migration, settlement patterns, disease, and death), and cultural attitudes toward disease and death. “Affinities” deals with kinship in its various forms (and its influence on behavior), and with gender roles and norms. “Resources” focuses on people, laying out the various and often permeable stages on the sliding social scale (from slave to free and from peasant to lord), and on economics, particularly in regard to the use of wealth in maintaining social relationships. Lastly, “Ideologies” looks at the wider picture, the influence of Christianity and Rome, the latter both as an idea and as a spe-

cific contemporaneous city.

By examining a wide range of sources (including law codes, statutes, archaeological findings, monastic estate accounts, letters by and from kings and popes, and religious writings), Smith reveals the diversity of regional experiences for each of these topics. For example, she looks at the regional variations in the survival of long distance trade, which almost disappeared in the western Mediterranean but thrived in the north of Europe (p. 188). Power and the legacy of Rome as an idea also recur as sub-themes throughout the chapters. Power shows up in the obvious places of associations between men and women, relations between lords and their subordinates, and kings' influence on ensuring the "right" type of Christianity, but Smith also teases out its presence in less obvious ways. For example, she analyzes the ramifications of a society choosing to write down its laws in the vernacular, thereby stressing their cultural roots, or in Latin, thus linking itself ideologically with the power of the Roman Empire (pp. 28-39). In this way Smith closely ties the theme of Rome's legacy with the theme of power.

The book's greatest strength, its appraisal of the early medieval period on its own terms, can also be considered its biggest liability. Some readers will appreciate the complexity of the description that emerges, while others may prefer a more traditional chronological grounding. For the latter in particular, the repeated references in the notes to other sections throughout the book could confuse more than enlighten, for these notes are intended to provide the reader with all the information on a specific topic or theme, not as a chronological aid. Instead, Smith has included a lengthy timeline at the end of the book to act as an ongoing reference.

The endnotes prove problematic in another respect, as well, since they are used to provide citations only to direct quotations of medieval authors in the body of the book. Without reference to the work of other historians, either in the text or the notations, it will be difficult for the non-specialist to assess the place of this book in the historiography as a whole. The "Further Reading" sec-

tion, which includes some brief commentary by Smith, somewhat alleviates this neglect of historiography in the body of the work by supplying starting points for those interested in delving into these topics in greater detail.

Smith has undoubtedly provided a great service in compiling into one book a wide range of topics (such as gender history, demography, literacy, patronage, and labor history, to name just a few) that form the basis of the debates that occupy early medieval historians today. Furthermore, by treating these topics in such detail, Smith implicitly argues for their importance in the practice of writing history. Thus, she stresses the contributions of women to early medieval culture and society, and she highlights the experiences of societies that fall outside of the "core" European regions of England, France, and Germany. As for the thorny problem of medieval periodization, which has interested so many other historians of this era, Smith repeatedly notes both her lack of interest in the controversy and what she views to be the impossibility of choosing hard-and-fast chronological limits. She thus sticks to the traditional chronological boundary points (though not the geographical ones), and focuses instead on creating a new identity for the period delimited by the years 500 and 1000 A.D.

Notes

[1]. Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York: Norton, 1939).

[2]. The literature on the "barbarian invasions" is vast, beginning with Edward Gibbon's identification of barbarism (along with the rise of Christianity) as the cause of Rome's collapse. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: W. Strahan, and T. Cadell, 1776). R.H.C. Davis's *A History of Medieval Europe*, which has recently been reprinted with updated appendices and reading lists, provides the more accepted interpretation of the interchange between Roman and Germanic cultures: R.H.C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to Saint Louis*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson, Longman, 2006).

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