

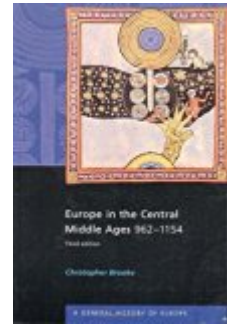
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages, 962-1154.* Harlow, England and New York: Longman, 2000. xvii + 470 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-36904-7.

John H. Mundy. *Europe in the High Middle Ages, 1150-1300.* Harlow, England and New York: Longman, 2000. xiv + 417 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-36987-0.

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Remaking the Middle Ages: Description and Interpretation

Remaking the Middle Ages: Description and Interpretation

These distinguished books are the authors' latest refinements of texts last revised in 1987 (Brooke) and 1991 (Mundy). They are consecutive volumes in the General History of Europe published by Longman. It should be said at once that both of these new versions are, each in its own way, substantive reworkings of the last editions. In addition, both books have been reset in attractive and more legible formats, the maps are bigger and easier to interpret, and some new illustrations in the Mundy volume are welcome aids to understanding. For all that, they cost about the same thing as the earlier editions did some years ago. However, both are sophisticated treatments and as such will not serve well for American undergraduates without at least some prior knowledge of medieval history. These are, moreover, very different sorts of books. The remarks that follow discuss the form and character of each, with reference to the preceding edition, in order to comment on their potential use in American college and university classrooms.

Christopher Brooke designs his book to survey an era of great and rapid change "such as Europe had not seen since the fall of the Roman Empire" (p. 12). He begins with a stimulating survey of the sources for his period, Latin and vernacular, literary and material. To open with a detailed discussion of sources is appropriate, for Brooke

hews closely to them throughout the book, sometimes quoting at length. After a chapter on Europe's cultural, physical, and political regions and boundaries, he proceeds to discuss the economy, social structure, women and marriage, urban life, travel, and the nature of government. There follow six chapters of lively political history narrative, then chapters on new developments in papal and monastic life, elite intellectual institutions and thought, and finally popular religion. Although he refers ironically to "those outmoded categories, social and economic and political history" (p. xiii), Brooke remains largely true to these great traditions. The circumscribing dates in the title are those of political history. The year 962 marked the imperial coronation in Rome of the Saxon Otto I, in one sense the opening of the post-Carolingian era in European politics, and 1154 saw two events of major significance: the death of King Roger the Great of Sicily, ruler of the "most mature royal government in western Europe" (p. 292) and the accession to the English throne of Henry Plantagenet, already by inheritance and marriage lord of Normandy, Anjou, and Aquitaine.

The book remains in keeping, then, with Brooke's remark that he has never encountered a student who had a real understanding of the period without a grasp of political history (p. xiv). Significantly, there is a five-page appendix of political chronology at the book's end. But the overall approach is hardly reactionary and is in some ways quite forward-looking. Despite the assertion that

“A comprehensive reworking’ is not what the reader will expect of me” (p. xiii), there has been very significant revision. There is one entirely new chapter on women, which is now carefully linked to the one on marriage, moved forward from its position as the last chapter in the previous edition. Many other chapters have been lightly revised, with some trimming and refashioning or addition of new material; most have at least some new notes reflecting recent scholarship. This is also an explicitly post-Cold War approach: Chapter Three, “The Shape of Europe,” now includes more on central and eastern Europe.

There are still important limits to what can be said, for as he notes, the documentation for Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia is often thin for those areas in the period under scrutiny. One could add that the secondary literature in languages western Europe and North American scholars usually read is also thin. Indeed, aside from the new section in Chapter Three, there is relatively little else about areas at the borders of Latin Christendom (nor, for that matter, about Scandinavia). Still, it is heartening to see self-conscious attention to places east of the Elbe and to what Brooke calls “the creation of peoples and states which will all surely soon be members of the European Union, as they have been partners in Europe for a thousand years” (p. xiv).

The new chapter on women, while wholly unsurprising to those who know much of the subject or its recent literature, is a fair summary of the state of scholarship, especially in its finding that “The opportunities open to women in this period scarcely expanded, and may even have contracted in marked contrast to the opportunities for men” (p. 123). Perhaps more research will prove that generalization wrong, but for the moment it is viable. In any case it will be hard to beat Brooke’s marvelous sketches of eminent women of the period – Hildegard of Bingen and Queens Emma and Eleanor – or the insightfully sympathetic pages on Heloise, her relations with Abelard, and their correspondence.

Of particular interest to teachers will be Brooke’s commentary on what he regards as seminal studies on the period published since he finished the last edition: Susan Reynolds’ *Fiefs and Vassals*, Giles Constable’s *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, and R.I. Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. In each case, Brooke offers observations on the advantages and limits of these fundamental works. In his largely positive evaluation of Reynolds’ vigorous dismantling of “the mighty edifice of medieval feudalism” (p. 97), Brooke notes that

he has used “feudal” even less than in previous editions of this book. Gone are the traditional discussion of fiefs and “feudalism”; wherever feasible throughout the book (and in particular in Chapter Ten on kingship and government) “tenurial” or “lordly” are substituted for previous editions’ “feudal” in order to be more specific or less overgeneralized. But Brooke also insists on the military and hierarchical nature of society in this era. He accepts Constable’s label of “reformation” for its recognition of variety in monastic life and thought of the era as well as its larger coherence, and calls Moore’s thesis about the development of mechanisms and mentalities of persecution in the twelfth and thirteenth century “exciting, complex and deeply interesting” (p. 398) while finding that it is too neat and does not address the simultaneous articulation of persecution’s opposite number, tolerance.

What Brooke criticizes in the recent work is the failure to see both sides or acknowledge fully the contradictions inherent in the developments they describe. If the theme in Brooke’s survey involves the important and lasting change in these two centuries, its mode is paradox, a word and concept which comes up throughout. Brooke highlights variety and paradox as a conscious “counterblast to the dominance of ‘mentalities, mentalities’ in our study of history” (p. xiv). Local and cosmopolitan vision, credulity and doubt, humility and arrogance, social engagement and flight from the world – all of these, Brooke finds, can exist in the same person, community, or ideology.

At times this willingness to embrace the possibility of paradox is genuinely illuminating. To take just one example: a constant question in medieval religious life was the extent, if any, to which women and men should join together in spiritual pursuits. Instead of seeing a tendency one way or another, Brooke insists, quite correctly in my view, on contemporaneous and contradictory impulses toward more collaboration between the sexes *and* more segregation of them (p. 131).

Such an approach may frustrate readers who want to know “what people in the twelfth century thought.” But it is hard to argue when Brooke, positing growth of both persecution and tolerance in his era, asks, “Is this really surprising? Is it too paradoxical? To those of us who have lived through the decades from the 1930s to the 1990s, the answer to both questions must be no” (p. 401). Even those who find explication of paradox an elegant style of fence-sitting can hardly fail to enjoy the colorful descriptions, vivid anecdotes, and vigorous narrative that characterize the whole of this learned and humane

portrait of an era.

If Brooke tells great stories, John H. Mundy tells one great story. It is the same story of the last edition of *Europe in the High Middle Ages, 1150-1300*, rewritten, in some paragraphs almost sentence by sentence, for greater coherence and readability. There has been some renaming of chapters and sections and the occasional addition of a paragraph or two or the reordering of material within a given chapter. Like Brooke, Mundy has sometimes substituted another adjective for “feudal,” although here there is no explicit discussion of new scholarship that calls for adjustments of this kind. As in the second edition, though, there are twenty-four chapters in the same order in six parts: “Europe,” “Economy,” “Society,” “Government,” “Thought,” and “1300.” The focus is firmly on western Europe; expanding on remarks in the second edition, Mundy regrets that he only barely touches on “the political and social history of Scandinavia, the Iberian peninsula, south Italy and Sicily, Slavic Europe and Greek and Saracen areas” (p. 5). His twofold reasons – no book cannot do everything and he hesitates to write about societies whose languages he cannot read – are surely sensible, and they allow him to concentrate on his major theme. It should also be said that Mundy’s analysis does at times refer to these regions, although apparently he would not extend his broad thesis to them.

Mundy interprets the period 1150-1300 as a coherent episode in western European history identified by the predominance of a global social and political situation within which was elaborated an array of practical and theoretical trends. “During the period treated in this book...most power was entrusted to the ecumenical authority of the Roman Church and to the local governments of town and countryside....Europe was led by an inadvertent but real alliance between the rural and urban well-to-do and the churchmen under the See of Peter” (p. 13). A later explanation of the same idea has it that “the local well-to-do had combined with ecumenical popes to weaken Europe’s emperors, kings, and regional princes” (p. 35). For Mundy, then, the story is not just, or even most importantly, the rise of the nation-state but the growth and creativity possible in an era when free people were subject to two monarchs, a secular prince and the pope, “thus destroying the pretensions to absolutism of both” (p. 204, see also p. 237). As he later states, this era of relative political decentralization, or more precisely multiple affiliation, “was a happy age of regional and urban liberty marked by great economic, social, and intellectual inventiveness....” (p. 222).

The first half of the book considers the articulation of society, ca. 1150-ca. 1300, within the structure of competing powers. By about 1300, France and Italy were secure in cultural dominance (Chapter Three); population densities had reached levels not surpassed again until many centuries later, medieval towns reached their apogee, and manufacture was dominated by textile, as would remain the case until modern times, and Italian traders, rather than operating in fairs like those in Champagne, were permanent residents in northern cities (Chapter Six); landlords had mostly become rentier investors and peasants workers as commerce, credit, and coinage took on universal European character (Chapter Seven); guilds had achieved economic dominance and an urban proletariat had emerged (Chapters Eight and Ten); and various social groups had become more layered and leveled (Chapters Nine through Twelve, *passim*).

The book’s second half is about institutional and intellectual developments, including various political ideas and experiments like conciliarist and parliamentary thought, both well developed before their temporary eclipse in the fourteenth century. Through this section of the book Mundy points toward the end of the era he describes, remarking for instance that by the late thirteenth century “The political unit was becoming larger and, clearly in England but even in France, the national state was being born....The independence that characterized the medieval town and rural lordship was beginning to wane” (p. 267). The book’s climax, the cap to its argument, comes with the battles between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France in the years around 1300 that signaled renewed strength of unifocal centralization and thus the end of the fragile balance of competing authorities that helped to shape the evolutions and accomplishments of the preceding period.

A precis does not do justice to the richness of Mundy’s analysis or suggest how skillfully diverse subjects are connected. One subtheme, which relates various religious ideas and movements, is medieval utopianism. Unlike Brooke, Mundy is comfortable with statistical approaches and will offer them with the reminder that they are of limited use (as opposed to Brooke, who more than once recuses himself from even the roughest estimates about figures on the argument that precise evidence is lacking.) Although the creativity and confidence of the period are highlighted, Mundy does not hesitate to expose unattractive elements, sometimes with great subtlety: he connects the end of the geographical expansion of Latin Christendom in the thirteenth century (except in eastern Europe) to internal crusading wars, and

also to increasingly virulent anti-Semitism: "At one time Latin Crusaders had gone to fight unbelievers abroad; now they chased Jews around at home" (p. 66).

The vision of European development in this era as the product of a fertile tension between competing powers is in fact a major historiographical thesis akin to Constable's twelfth-century reformation and Moore's persecuting society. While a glance at the table of contents might make one think *Europe in the High Middle Ages, 1150-1300* would read much like Brooke's survey, it does not. Indeed, it is sometimes heavy going even for the seasoned reader of medieval history. Mundy makes no concessions to superficial understanding of either business practices or theology. This book covers a great deal of territory – much of it insightfully – yet is far closer to a monographic interpretation or essay than a survey text. The presentation is almost uncompromisingly analytic, essentially assuming a grasp of the basics, which are reviewed and then fit into Mundy's interpretive frame. In this way Mundy's book is reminiscent of R.W. Southern's *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, which is far more than a volume in the Penguin History of the Church.

What, then, might be the use of these books for American university teachers and students? It should be clear that these are not books for novices. Brooke's survey would serve very well for an advanced course in the history of the central Middle Ages; with some background, students would be in good position to appreciate the care and animation of the presentation, as well as its close relation to the sources. Furthermore, the book's chapters could be read in almost any order, since they are essentially self-contained units on various topics. Even if teachers do not assign the book to students, they will

find it a gold mine of anecdotes and human-interest details (I have used the previous edition for that purpose with profit. Furthermore, some of the summaries of recent scholarship may be useful for organizing discussions on the use of "feudalism" for understanding medieval society, or the nature of medieval social ideologies of tolerance, co-optation, or persecution.

Mundy's book, I would say, is only for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, those who wish to review the period within the context of a forceful argument. The initiated will also be in a better position to appreciate Mundy's dry wit. After listing some of the texts translated into the vernacular for the count of Guines by a secretary, which included scripture, sermons, biblical commentaries, medical and scientific tracts, and selections from Augustine, Denis the Areopagite, and Thales of Miletus, Mundy notes that "Dinner, when reading often took place, must have been a heavy affair up there in Guines" (p. 21). Teachers may want to use a few of Mundy's pithier statements, e.g., "Although women were obviously often happy, they were subordinate" (p. 142) or "Although Europe's larger states and rural and urban lordships were monarchies large and small, significant republican and even democratic elements were to be seen in town and village" (p. 254) as a basis for undergraduate discussions or writing assignments. In different ways, these books are very useful for American teachers of medieval history and thoughtful approaches to their respective periods.

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