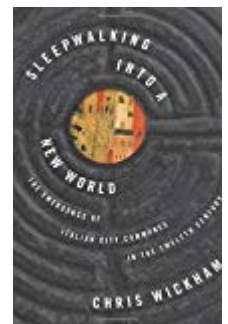


Chris Wickham. *Medieval Rome: Stability and Crisis of a City, 900-1150.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 512 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-968496-0.



Chris Wickham. *Sleepwalking into a New World: The Emergence of Italian City Communes in the Twelfth Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 320 S. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14828-1.



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Commissioned by Brian J. Maxson (East Tennessee State University)

Historians of medieval Italy have long debated the origins of the Italian communes, the emergence of which allowed for a wealth of later developments, including the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance and, perhaps, the republicanism of the modern era. There is no clear transition to mark the official arrival of the commune. The appearance of the title of consul or the use of the word commune in surviving documents can pre- or post-date a de facto communal government. However, it is clear that between 1050 and 1150 civic government shifted from an aristocratic, military, clerical elite to a (still elite) leadership now engaged in collective consular government with

frequent turnover. These autonomous, collectively governed cities characterized the social, cultural, and political development of Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, so much so that this period is often referred to as the “Communal Age.” To Italian scholars in particular this period represents the forging of a unique national identity. Italian historians of the last century fought their ideological battles on the field of communal history, assigning special significance to urban autonomy as the precursor to the modern republic and even to differences between northern and southern economic development. In *Sleepwalking Into a New World* and *Medieval Rome*, Chris

Wickham steps into this debate to dispel some common myths (e.g., that the communes resulted from conflict between merchants and aristocrats in the eleventh century) and to continue the work of Hagen Keller, Philip Jones, and, most importantly, Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur in rethinking the nature of the early communes. Despite the importance of this topic, there is still a dearth of empirical comparative studies across cities and regions. In *Sleepwalking* Wickham offers a detailed examination of three case studies (Milan, Pisa, and Rome) to compare and contrast the development of communal government in these very different medieval Italian cities. In *Medieval Rome* he explores the economic, social, and cultural development of the Roman commune in the context of the larger narrative of medieval Italian history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In *Sleepwalking* Wickham is primarily interested in the question of who oversaw early communal development and what these leaders thought of this dramatic change. Indeed, Wickham asks whether they perceived it as change at all. Relying on narrative, diplomatic, and judicial records to describe the development of communal government in three case studies (Milan, Pisa, and Rome, which form the second, third, and fourth chapters, respectively), Wickham emphasizes the ad hoc, improvisational nature of communal development. He argues that the architects of communal government were most likely unaware of the extent of their innovation, “sleepwalking into a new and often radically different régime: all the while, for the most part, pretending that they were doing nothing of the kind” (p. 20). Wickham particularly engages with Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, who argued in 2003 that the leadership of the communes in the eleventh and twelfth centuries expanded from a small group of aristocrats to include all mounted warriors, including lesser landowners and members of the mercantile, artisanal, and judicial and notarial strata. Wickham instead breaks down Maire Vigueur’s urban mounted militia into three strata: landowners

with substantial rural and urban holdings, lesser landowners with some commercial interests, and a “medium elite” of judicial officials. In each case study the interplay of these strata determined the formation and nature of consular communal government in the first decades of the twelfth century.

In his final chapter, Wickham compares the detailed case studies of Milan, Pisa, and Rome to a more structural survey of other early communes, divided mainly by region. He compares the relatively precocious communes of Genoa and Asti to regional differences in Piedmont, Lombardy and Emilia, the Romagna and the Veneto, and Tuscany. Throughout the book and especially in the final chapter, Wickham’s argument and evidence point to the difference, complexity, and contingency of communal development. According to Wickham, no single elite stratum or process created the early communal systems that had crystallized by the thirteenth century, nor was this a conscious process. Indeed, the one common thread through all cities seems to have been the extent to which members of the civic leadership “did not know what they were doing; or, to the extent that they did, were cloaking their actions, even to themselves, in imagery which belonged to other political systems” (p. 204).

Fortuitously, the publication of *Sleepwalking* coincides with the publication of an English translation of Wickham’s *Roma medievale: Crisi e stabilità di una città, 900–1150*. For this study, Wickham consulted a daunting number of archival parchments in regional ecclesiastical and state archives, including the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, the Archivio Storico Capitolino in Rome, and the state archives of Rome and Florence. In *Medieval Rome* Wickham attempts to place Rome in the context of medieval Italy, “to situate, as much as possible, the history of Rome inside that of Italy” (p. 2). To that end, Wickham identifies the early history of the communes as the moment when historians began

to detach Rome from the larger historical narrative of Italy. The exceptional nature of Rome separates it somewhat from the development of other Italian communes, particularly in terms of the complexity of its elite class, which at times included separate military, judicial, and clerical hierarchies. Wickham, however, argues that Rome's differences, even as a papal city, were not so great as to separate its communal development from that of other Italian cities, especially those in the north with their own episcopal ties.

Here Wickham begins with an analysis of the economy of Rome through the twelfth century; he then moves on to a sociopolitical and finally cultural analysis of communal development in Rome. In chapter 2, he explores the relationship between the city and *contado* of Rome, which was essential to the city's primarily agrarian economy. Moving through the crises of the eleventh century that allowed secular landholders to begin to compete with their ecclesiastical counterparts in the Agro romano and the increased specialization and expansion of vineyards and orchards around the city, Wickham points out that the remarkable continuity of Roman landholding and management was the result of Rome's early dominance over the countryside compared to other Italian cities. Chapter 3 analyzes Rome's urban economy, where the difference between Roman development and that of other major cities becomes even more pronounced by the eleventh century. While cities like Milan, Venice, Florence, and Genoa expanded, "Rome's early size and wealth was measured by the much more modest parameters of the early Middle Ages; it did not adapt to the more commercial world of the central medieval Mediterranean with as much brio" (p. 112). Chapters 4 and 5 examine the sociopolitical makeup of Rome in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, examining urban aristocratic hierarchies, their regional divisions, and the "medium elites." In chapter 6, Wickham analyzes the cultural practices that gave Romans the unity of a shared past. Chapter 7 explores the moments of rupture and development during the

crises of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Wickham's conclusion closely parallels that of *Sleepwalking*, and here he argues that Rome's development in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was, in fact, closely tied to the development of the northern communes, though Rome enjoyed more structural continuity than most other Italian cities during that period.

There are many similarities between these two works, including some repeated arguments and evidence (Rome is, after all, one of the case studies in *Sleepwalking*). As with Wickham's other works, the sophistication of his arguments will appeal to a specialist audience, but the clear, conversational style and lack of jargon, coupled with his obvious grasp of the evidence and historiography, make both of these volumes accessible to nonspecialists. Wickham's passion for medieval Italian urban history comes across on every page. He tends to present the juicier evidence with especial glee (for example, the twelfth-century use of names beginning with "Caca" and "Caga," which he mentions in both volumes and calls "one of the clearest northern Italian contributions to civic innovation and idealism") (*Medieval Rome*, 382). That said, *Sleepwalking* may be more useful for teaching than *Medieval Rome*, the detail of which may be overwhelming for some undergraduate readers. For those picking up either volume as a foray into Italian communal history, it would be helpful to first be familiar with Philip Jones and Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, since some knowledge of their work may be required to fully appreciate many of Wickham's arguments and re-examinations of the evidence. Read together, these two texts offer a helpful comparative analysis of the growth of the early Italian communes and an exhaustively detailed case study of one of the more exceptional cities.

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