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A Fresh Approach to Teaching Medieval History

The Middle Ages: A Graphic History is a breezy, conversational, and well-conceived overview of the time period. The text mainly focuses on western Europe, but it does well in establishing the larger Eurasian context of the history with brief discussions of the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire and the Islamic conquests. The author, medieval historian Eleanor Janega, makes it clear from the outset that the book is for a general audience interested in learning the basics of the period. To that end, Janega and the illustrator, Neil Max Emmanuel, succeed admirably in creating an effective introduction to the Middle Ages.

Janega's narrative is smooth and easy to follow without sacrificing scholarly rigor, and Emmanuel's illustrations are in turn whimsical—there seems to be a very Monty Python-esque feel to them—and instructive. The book itself is divided into eight chronologically arranged sections that start with “Roman Inheritance” and end with “The End of the Middle Ages.” Each section is further divided into topic-based subsections (e.g., “The Rise of Cities”, “The Reconquista”) that help the reader keep track of the wide variety of subject matter. Throughout the book, key terms, names, dates, people, et cetera (e.g., “Roman Empire,” “Bayeux Tapestry,” “feudalism”) are highlighted in bold, which invites further exploration. A Graphic History touches on pretty much all of the major events and trends in the Middle Ages and admirably explains the differences and the continuities in culture, religion, and politics.

In the introduction, Janega aptly points out that “something that's true for early medieval Italy isn't true for late medieval Germany. The multireligious, multicultural society of medieval Spain was far different than Scotland. It's also hard to make such comparisons because Spain, Italy and Germany didn't exist yet.” This statement is a valuable caution for the intended audience of the text, and Janega continues, “the main things to accept about medieval history are: there is a lot of it; it's
complicated; and you probably don’t know much about it—yet. This book is going to help fix that” (p. 9, author’s emphasis). With that mission statement concluding the introduction, the book dives headfirst into the tangle of late antiquity and ends its journey in the sixteenth century.

A text as broad as *A Graphic History* is bound to leave out important details or not be entirely up-to-date on the scholarship. For example, in discussing the crowning of Charlemagne as “Emperor of the Romans” by Pope Leo III, Janega mentions that the pope “called into question whether or not the Eastern Roman Empire was Rome” (p. 39). That statement is not quite accurate. Rather, both the pope and Charlemagne felt that the throne was “empty” because they did not recognize the status of Empress Irene as the ruler of the empire—a status that was not questioned by most of her subjects.

One of the other examples of the text’s tendency toward oversimplification is the section on Caesaropapism. While the Eastern Roman emperors did have a great deal of say over the administration of and, to some extent, the theology of the church, the emperors’ control of the church was never as absolute as the term suggests. Also, theologians both West and East, as well as monks and laypeople all played significant roles in shaping Christian doctrine and practice.

Another issue is that the text does not contain a glossary of terms, despite the implication of such by the bolded words throughout the book. A glossary seems to me to be an essential element for a book meant for a general audience. For instance, the above-mentioned section on Caesaropapism does not specify where the officials who made up the Pentarchy (referring to the heads of the five Great Sees of Christendom—Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople) actually came from, or why those locations were important. A brief glossary entry would have allowed the author to present that additional important information without disrupting the overall narrative.

There are certainly other specific instances throughout the book that specialists in the differing subjects covered can take issue with, but that is a potential issue with any survey-type text. However, there is much more that recommends it. For instance, an entire section is dedicated to “The ‘Other’ in the Medieval Period,” which includes subsections on women, sex workers, Jews, LGB-TQIA+ people, heretics, and lepers. These subsections are all relatively short and each of these formerly marginalized groups have been the subject of a great deal of scholarship, but their inclusion in a general text is valuable for emphasizing the diversity of European societies in the Middle Ages.

One of the greatest strengths of *A Graphic History* comes from the concluding section, which eloquently sums up the importance and relevance of the Middle Ages for people now. The concluding section also includes the most meaningful juxtaposition of text and image in the book. For example, on one side of the text “And because of the colonialism of the modern period, medieval European views were exported around the world—not always for the best” is a picture of G. W. Bush with his “Mission Accomplished” sign, and on the other is a medieval crusader king saying, “Deus Vult” (God wills it) (p. 174). Author and illustrator provide a vivid reminder that the sorts of European resource-extraction colonialism that led to so much violence in the past are still very much alive and well.

In addition, Janega concisely summarizes the varied historiographical views on what ended the medieval period in Europe. For some scholars, including Janega herself, the end comes after the Hussite Rebellion; for some, it’s the fall of Constantinople, and for others it’s the end of the Reconquista or the beginning of race-based chattel slavery (pp. 154-168). That summary serves as another excellent example of how *A Graphic History*
introduces complex topics in a way that is accessible and enjoyable.

While *A Graphic History* is, at its heart, a book for a popular audience, its coverage of a broad range of topics, its readability, and its general rigor would make it a useful supplemental text for an introductory-level medieval or world history course.

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