



2005

Representing a Bigger Middle Ages

Carol Neel
Colorado College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Neel, Carol (2005) "Representing a Bigger Middle Ages," *Quidditas*: Vol. 26 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol26/iss1/15>

This Text and Teaching is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Representing a Bigger Middle Ages

Barbara H. Rosenwein. *A Short History of the Middle Ages*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2002. 362 pages. \$42.95.

Colin McEvedy. *The New Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*. London: Penguin Books, 1992. 112 pages. \$13.95.

Patrick J. Geary. *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002. 261 pages. \$19.95.

Carol Neel
Colorado College

This review of publications useful for the medieval history classroom assembles three works (none of them very new and one of them now nearly fifteen years old) of particular interest in meeting a central challenge in early twenty-first-century teaching of the European Middle Ages: that the period is no longer strictly European. These works support the historian trained in a prior generation of medieval scholarship to present medieval European civilization in its world context.

Within the past twenty-five years, the stolidly Eurocentric identity of medieval studies as an interdisciplinary enterprise has gradually leached away. Today, not only scholarly publications but graduate training and even undergraduate interest in medieval civilization stretch Europe's old boundaries. Cross-cultural contacts, especially connections with the Islamic world, elicit lively interest on the part of neophytes as well as mature scholars in medieval studies. Indeed, Europeanists centrally interested in a medieval past—in literatures, art history, history of science, and history of the family and material culture alike—increasingly adopt either a comparatist approach in their professional work or focus their attention on the eastern or southern fringes of what used to seem the coherent and self-sufficient world of Latin Christendom.

Meanwhile, perhaps lamentably but nonetheless understandably, the great majority of teachers of medieval history and the constituent sister-disciplines of medieval studies generally vamp, as teachers, to keep up. Like most contemporary academics, they affirm the desirability of attention to various medieval cultures in relation to contemporary global civilization, but they generally lack any formal training in even closely related Byzantine and Islamic histories. A majority of well-trained medievalists in North American tenured ranks today lack any useful Greek; only a few know Arabic. And although most historians, art historians, and especially historians of science command a basic knowledge of the principal traits of medieval Muslim cultures in their contact with the West, their knowledge of historical Islam is uncomfortably thin. Yet students even in the medieval survey are eager to learn about all three great successor-civilizations of the Roman Empire. This review article points to a few resources of special usefulness for the confessedly narrowly educated European medievalist interested in accommodating these burdensome if laudable contemporary demands. Its argument for employing these works rests on the reviewer's teaching experience in a small, highly selective liberal arts college, but the pedagogical tactics it proposes seem equally suitable to a broad variety of undergraduate programs.

The first teaching text addressed here is Barbara Rosenwein's medieval survey, *A Short History of the Middle Ages*. The conservative title of this handsomely, even lavishly illustrated and beautifully written volume belies its spirit of adventure; here Rosenwein, in her own scholarly production principally a historian of monastic culture, smoothly knits together an account of the central developments of medieval Europe with thorough yet accessible attention to both the Islamic world and the Byzantine Empire. Effectively she builds—from the perspective of the Eurocentrically trained faculty member—from the most solid points of his/her knowledge of Western political and ecclesiastical developments to enrich the narrative construction of medieval Europe with reference to fresh scholarship on cultural and social

history. All the while, she lays out alongside an engaging portrayal of European civilization an outline of its eastern and southern analogs buttressed, from the student's point of view as well, by constant connections to the more familiar material of the western Christendom. Solely from the European perspective, there is no better textbook of medieval civilization available today. The added contextualization of two contemporary Mediterranean cultures further distinguishes Rosenwein's survey. Images from the medieval world and frequent maps are fully addressed in the text, investing this introductory volume with yet another level of usefulness for today's highly visual undergraduate learner.

The present reviewer has used Rosenwein's *Short History* for the medieval survey twice since its appearance in 2002. In other years, despite appreciation for the volume's encouragement to develop her own and her students' knowledge of the Muslim and Byzantine worlds, she has entirely avoided the use of any survey text, as is likely possible only in the all-seminar liberal arts college context and in a department in which many courses are built from all primary reading lists contextualized by faculty-provided historical context. But again, in the new medieval history classroom, students' knowledge of the basic shape of European history and even geography is thinner than was the case in prior decades—although their sense of world history is richer. Given that pedagogical context, another tried and true teaching tool assumes particular usefulness: the old *New Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*. This slim book shares with Rosenwein's introductory volume an emphatic appeal to the sensibilities of a student generation especially attracted to and skilled in its attention to images. Like Rosenwein's *Short History*, Colin McEvedy's atlas presents medieval European civilization in the Mediterranean context, emphasizing the connectedness of the western church and kingdoms with the military and economic circumstances of the Middle East, even the Seljuk and Mongol khanates of the Asian steppes. In accompanying its lucid, dynamic maps with a crisp outline narrative of European events in their world context, this volume too supports the instructor and students committed to a

wide perspective on medieval Europe. Functioning as a minimalist textbook, the *Penguin Atlas* enables the daring faculty member and students effectively to build their own interpretations of primary European texts inside a sturdy and economical, if minimalist framework of chronology and historical geography.

Finally, Patrick Geary's 2002 volume from Princeton, *The Myth of Nations*, presents a less detailed but powerfully suggestive way of supporting even the beginning student of the European past to understand medieval Europe in a larger geographical and narrative framework. In this volume, Geary recurs to his long-term theme, that "Europe"—in the earlier Middle Ages in particular—is more a heuristic device for moderns than a historical reality for the western peoples. His much-debated argument that medieval nationhood is not only a misleading fiction but an untruth with devastating implications in driving and retrospectively justifying modern conflict is among the most provocative of critiques of the conventional metanarrative in which most of today's teaching medievalists received their intellectual formation. As such, it stands us on our heads—a situation it does our students great good to observe. While Rosenwein's elegant beginners' history of medieval civilization breaks Europe's boundaries to spill challengingly across the Mediterranean and McEvedy's little atlas, correspondingly, graphically maps the expansion of the historiography of Europe into Byzantium and the Muslim world, Geary's essay explodes the borders of the continent from the inside out. Still more effectively than the other volumes addressed here, *Myth of Nations* explains why medievalists, who are themselves the intellectual progeny of a Europe internally anguished by national identities and conflict-ridden in a world theatre by their own flawed historical assumptions, should make the supreme effort to reinvent a past they once thought they understood.

Together and separately, these works—two intended as propaedeutics to medieval studies and one the manifesto of a scholar incidentally useful as a schoolbook—suggest that the great effort with which professional medievalists are today faced, to reframe their teaching in a world-historical context, may indeed be

worth it: students respond to these works with enthusiasm. Without the blessing or the burden of our rich specialization, they consider it normal and necessary to view historical cultures in mutual comparison. Watching them do so with the help of these works is heartening enough that even the middle-aged historian of the Middle Ages wishes to stay by them as they construct a new past for old Europe.

Carol Neel is Professor of History at Colorado College. Her published works center on medieval affinities, both familial and monastic. Her most recent book, forthcoming from Paulist Press in the Classics of Western Spirituality series and co-authored with Theodore Antry, O.Praem., treats apologetic and hagiographical sources for the twelfth-century Order of Prémontré. She is a past president of RMMRA and represents it on the Medieval Academy of America's Council on Centers and Regional Associations.



*Al-Idrisi's world map from 1154. Note that south is at the top of the map.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_al-Idrisi (Accessed 12/6/2006)*