Spring 2013

Remembering the Middle Ages

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REMEMBERING THE MIDDLE AGES

By Zachary A. Strietelmeier

Dialogue.
A. *Was I ill? and is it ended?*
Pray, by what physician tended?
I recall no pain endured!
B. *Now I know your trouble's ended.*
He that can forget, is cured.[1]

According to the English monk and scholar known as the Venerable Bede, there exist three methods by which time is reckoned: custom, nature, and authority.[2] To introduce these elements, Bede provides his own etymology for the word time (*tempus*). Considered in the plural, he explains that "times (*tempora*) take their name from 'measure' (*temperamentum*)."[3] *Temperamentum*, in turn, derives from the verb *tempero*, "to be moderate, to divide, to regulate." Ergo, in addition to its function as a passive construct of custom, nature, and authority, time also assumes an active role—it moderates, it divides, it regulates.[4] Writing in the early eighth century, Bede captures this paradoxical nature of time's sovereignty, one which governs and is governed simultaneously, and thus he lays the groundwork for his own periodization schemata. Recently, however, such schemata have come under attack. A familiar example is the substitution of C.E. (Common Era) for A.D. (*anno domini*) in an attempt to extricate historical inquiry from the sacred.[5] Not only is this particular division in question, but, today, periodization in general "finds itself in a very bad odor indeed."[6] Postmodern criticism of "the period," by recognizing the dual functionality of time, as outlined by Bede, emphasizes its role as a political act. Most scholars now concur with Johannes Fabian's assertion that time, if it is regulated by the politics of custom, nature, and authority, will regulate history with those same political phenomena. In other words, periodization has a

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882], trans. Thomas Common, Paul V. Cohn, and Maude D. Petre (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2008), 2.

[2] Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* [8th century], trans. Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 13.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1.

[5] Ibid., 3.

[6] Lawrence Besserman, "The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives," in *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 3.

political agenda.[7] One temporal division central to this discourse on the "politics of time" is the tripartite periodization of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity. Through a detailed historiography of the ancient-medieval-modern schema, this essay contends that periodization of the Middle Ages reflects the socio-political environments in which it is perceived and thus imposes the same political agendas as a regulating function—that is, the medieval period survives more as a conceptual division than a temporal one.

Like all political structures, this tripartite periodization of Western history builds upon historical paradigms that were present prior to its inception. The earliest temporal schemata developed from ancient myths and legends instituted by the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. Yet, while Greek and Roman traditions supplied a plethora of time-reckoning techniques, the main source for Western (Judeo-Christian) periodization paradigms was biblical literature.[8] For the scholars of Late Antiquity, the Bible served both as a historical account, providing a template for marking the past, and as a prophetic book, providing a method for interpreting the future.[9] Perhaps the most influential periodization schema derived from biblical narrative was that known as the Six Ages of the World. In the late third century, Sextus Julius Africanus advanced an early but unorthodox version of this schema, asserting that each age equaled a thousand years, and thereby predicted the Second Coming of Christ around A.D. 500. Augustine, a century later, put forward his own division of the Six Ages of the World and, in response to Julius, made a point of declaring the duration of the "sixth age" unknowable.[10] History, then, remained part of this undifferentiated "sixth age," a true "middle age" (*medium aevum*) from the first coming of Christ to his Second Coming at the end of time.[11] It is in the context of this ahistorical "sixth age" that Petrarch advocated a future resumption of history and thus inspired the tripartite periodization of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity.[12]

Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), anglicized as Petrarch, reinvented the medieval periodization schema established by Augustine in the early fifth century, prompting the formation of the ancient/medieval and medieval/modern divisions of history. When Augustine asserted his Six-Ages-of-the-World schema, he set it alongside the Six Ages of Man, claiming that the world grows old and, like man, gets worse over time. By the fourteenth century, this birth-

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[7] Davis, 2.

[8] Besserman, 5-6.

[9] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; repr., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 29.

[10] Besserman, 7.

[11] Amos Funkenstein, "Periodization and Self-Understanding in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times," *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 5 (1974): 8.

[12] John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 435-36.

maturation-death paradigm was thoroughly ingrained into medieval thought.[13] Yet, Petrarch saw a hope of temporal resurrection, namely through the rediscovery of classical Rome. After a prolonged visit to Rome in 1341 for his coronation as poet laureate, Petrarch asked a correspondent the following question: "Who can doubt that Rome would rise up again if she but began to know herself?"[14] Rome, in this case, referred to pagan and not Christian Rome, as Petrarch affirms in the same letter, drawing a boundary between what he considers to be ancient and modern history.[15] Unlike the classical age of Rome, Petrarch believed the time in which he lived to be one shrouded in darkness, a "middle squalor" suspended between two "happier ages."[16] The darkness (*tenebrae*) that for the medieval person was characteristic of the pagan times preceding Christ, described for Petrarch the Christian times in which he lived.[17] In the final lines of his epic poem *Africa* (1338/9), Petrarch emphatically conveys this *tenebrae* along with his ardent hope for a classical revival: "My life is destined to be spent 'midst storms and turmoil. But…a more propitious age will come again…Our posterity, perchance, when the dark clouds are lifted, may enjoy once more the radiance the ancients knew."[18] In contrast to the Augustinian birth-maturation-death topos, Petrarch offers an alternative tripartite paradigm of birth-death-rebirth, one which can be equally imposed upon or extrapolated from events in the biblical narrative.[19] So, even though Petrarch, in celebrating pagan classicism, introduced historical divisions to the ahistorical "sixth age," his periodization schema still resided within the Judeo-Christian framework.

Of course, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars did not immediately embrace this novel method of periodization—the roots of the Christian universal histories had grown too deep.[20] Even Vasari's classic account of the so-called "rebirth" (*la rinascità*) of art, written in 1550, reflected the birth-maturation-death topos of Augustine. It was not until Polydore Vergil's *Historica Angilicae* (1534) that a logical, scholastically recognized defense of the birth-death-rebirth model surfaced in northern Europe. Polydore, in this

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[13] Besserman, 7.

[14] Petrarch, *Fam.* 6.2, ed. Rossi, 2:58, quoted in Theodor E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,'" *Speculum* 17, no. 2 (April 1942): 232. "The etymological connection between *media tempestas* and *tempest* reflects a specialization in the meaning of *tempestas* from 'time' to 'period of time' to 'season' to 'stormy weather' to 'a specific type of storm.'" Dagenais, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," 434n9.

[15] Mommsen, 233.

[16] Petrarch, *Epistola metrica* 3.33, lines 1-6, ed. F. Neri et al., *Rime, Trionfi e poesie latine* (Millan: Ricciardi, n.d.), 802, quoted in Dagenais, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," 433.

[17] Mommsen, 227.

[18] Petrarch, *Petrarch's Africa* [1338-9], trans. Thomas G. Bergin and Alice S. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 239, lines 634-41.

[19] Besserman, 8.

[20] Funkenstein, 9.

work, adheres to the same life-cycle paradigm of Augustine but provides one notable caveat: he explains that nations, unlike human beings, are not restricted to a single lifetime.[21] There were exceptions, however, to this tardy reception of the Petrarchan schema; they came largely from the Italian city-states, whose citizens had long rebuffed the claims of the Holy Roman Empire as well as the "transfer of rule" (*translatio imperii*) which gave it legitimacy. By rejecting the *translatio imperii* between the Roman and medieval empires, Italian Renaissance humanists simultaneously rejected a continuous universal history, and thus scholars like Leonardo Bruni (d. 1444) and Flavio Biondo (1392-1463) were more readily able to reference the ancient-medieval-modern periodization in their works.[22] Throughout the 1500s and 1600s, many prominent scholars recognized and employed the temporal divisions outlined by Petrarch. Yet, it was Christoph Cellarius who first systematically organized Western history according to this tripartite schema, publishing his *Universal History Divided into an Ancient, Medieval, and New Period* just prior to 1700.[23]

Many modern historians, including Fabian, consider the humanists' rejection of the *translatio imperii* and their break from the continuous universal histories of Judeo-Christianity to be an "achieved secularization of time." For these modern historians, Cellarius' work marked a critical divide between sacred and secular history.[24] However, Fabian's famous critique on anthropology, *Time and the Other*, proved to be self-negating on this particular point. While, on the one hand, Fabian advocates the recognition of temporal politics, on the other, he further politicizes the medieval/modern divide by presupposing a corresponding sacred/secular divide.[25] His assumption of such a sacred/secular rift in time consequently ignores many historical developments. For example, long before the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, Bede put forward an organized explanation of cyclic and linear time that was based on religious ideology, and these temporal constructions are still being used today.[26] The recent substitution of C.E. for A.D. notwithstanding, the incarnation of Christ continues to define the foundation of chronological (linear) time. In fact, with this new nomenclature, the effect of Bede's periodization is greater, as it employs the same mechanism of division (i.e. the incarnation) but operates under a secular and apparently

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[21] Besserman, 8.

[22] Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 159. N.b. Polydore Vergil was born at Urbino in central Italy before Pope Alexander VI selected him for a tax-collecting office in England soon after 1500. Holding various church preferments, Polydore remained in England until 1550, when he purportedly returned to Urbino.

[23] Ibid., 181.

[24] Davis, 2-3.

[25] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1-2.

[26] Davis, 106.

more universal façade.[27] Karl Löwith, in his *Meaning in History*, makes a similar observation, asserting that modern historical concepts are merely secularized counterparts to the eschatological patterns found in Judeo-Christian ideology. By exposing the continuity between "sacred" and "secular" histories, Löwith seeks to undermine the popular claim that modern theory presents the only legitimate history and can therefore serve as a decisive sovereign of time (dividing the medieval/sacred from the modern/secular). Modern sovereignty, Löwith argues, disavows the very history upon which it is established.[28] Although these twentieth-century expositions on the secularization of time have had a significant impact on recent understandings of periodization, they actually underscore a preexisting attitude of triumphalism, one which dates back to Petrarch's conception of the "dark ages."

The term "dark ages" was never primarily a scientific description but rather a "battle-cry," a condemnation of medieval thought and culture as a whole. Propounded by scholars such as Voltaire and Gibbon, this slogan became most common during the Age of Enlightenment, a period whose very name attests to the disaffection between it and the preceding era of *tenebrae*.[29] Voltaire, in his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* (1756), bewails the Middle Ages as a time when "human nature was plunged, for such a series of ages, into this condition so similar, and in so many respects inferior to that of brutes…"[30] He, not unlike the Renaissance scholars, celebrated the present and denigrated the past. In his *Advice to a Journalist* (1737), Voltaire writes the following: "As to the young, do instill in them a taste for the history of recent times, which to us is a matter of necessity, rather than ancient history, which is only a matter of curiosity."[31] Though not yet formulated as a method of periodization, the presentism of Voltaire greatly reflected the sacred/secular divide explored above. The "philosophy of history," as defined by his influential *Essay on Manners*, was expressly distinguished from the theological interpretation found in medieval universal histories; reason and the will of man, not providence and the will of God, governed Voltaire's historical inquiry.[32] As a result, both Voltaire and Gibbon employed the founding of Constantinople as a symbol to inaugurate the decline of the Roman Empire.[33] Indeed, much of Edward

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[27] Davis, 3.

[28] Ibid., 83-84.

[29] Mommsen, 227.

[30] Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History: The Manners, and Spirit of Nations, from the Reign of Charlemagne to the Age of Louis XIV*, 2nd ed. [1756], trans. Nugent (London, 1759), 9.

[31] Voltaire, *Counseils à un journaliste* (May 10, 1737), in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, 50 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877-85), 22:244, quoted in Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History," *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009): 462.

[32] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 1.

[33] Voltaire, *Essay on Manners*, 9. Cf. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1776] (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1879), 503. "Standing first, 'the foundation of Constantinople' marks the culmination of that movement of empire to power-centres

Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) drew from the popular achievements of Voltaire, as did the works of Hume and Robertson.[34] Together, the scholarship of these "enlightened" historians did much to extend the perception of the "dark ages" first conveyed by Petrarch, and reinforced the notion that the medieval period was one unworthy of remembrance.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the expression "dark ages" became increasingly restricted and was eventually altogether abandoned by medievalists. While *The American Cyclopaedia* of 1883 still applied the term in its widest sense (ca. 400-1500), by the turn of the twentieth century, the "dark ages" no longer encompassed the full scope of the Middle Ages. Instead, as defined in the 1909 edition of *The Americana*, it represented only the time between the fall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 475 and the discovery of the Pandects at Amalfi in 1137.[35] In turn, the fourteenth (1929) edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* did not even include the expression, explaining that "the contrast, once so fashionable, between the ages of darkness and the ages of light has no more truth to it than have the idealistic fancies which underlie attempts at medieval revivalism."[36] Yet, despite the absence of the term "dark ages" in the popular encyclopedia, the triumphalism of the Renaissance and Enlightenment has continued to pervade modern thought, especially in the form of monolithic sacred/secular and feudal/capitalist divides.[37] In concluding her book, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, Kathleen Davis references a recent National Public Radio broadcast (aired 18 June 2007), which attributed the current unrest in Pakistan to the nation's "ancient system of feudalism and privilege." Essentially, the report maintained that if Pakistan could overcome these antiquated structures of government, it could act as a stable, useful ally to the U.S. in the war on terrorism.[38] As conveyed in this NPR sound-bite, use of the term "feudalism"—not unlike Petrarch's "dark ages"—temporally distances its object from the modern world. In Davis's words, "It allows reports such as this to deflect recent political events, and to attribute current problems in nations such as Pakistan simply to 'ancient,' ostensibly endemic, cultural factors."[39] So, despite the constant efforts of modern scholarship to eschew triumphalism, the perceptions of the Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers have left an indelible impression on the Western mind.

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alibi quam Romae which Gibbon tells us had 'started in his mind' as a subject on the steps of the Capitol in 1764." J. G. A. Pocock, *Religion: The First Triumph*, vol. 5 of *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

[34] Force, 458-459.

[35] Mommsen, 226.

[36] Ibid., 226.

[37] Davis, 2.

[38] Philip Reeves, "Pakistanis Criticize Influence of Feudal Families," *Morning Edition*, 18 June 2007, quoted in Davis, 132.

[39] Davis, 133.

The scholastic shift away from triumphalism largely precipitated from the series of events that took place in France between 1789 and 1815. During this period, the failure of the Jacobin radical experiment and the Napoleonic Empire left many scholars disenchanted with triumphalist ideology; the notion that a civilization could abolish its age-old traditions in favor of new, purely rational constructs to achieve a society of complete justice and happiness had proved erroneous. As a result, a resurgence of medieval scholarship emerged under nationalistic pursuits, defending the *ancien régime* as a fundamental part of both human progress and national identity.[40] It is in this context that the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm F. Hegel (1770-1831) proposed his progressive model of cultural history, one which provided the Middle Ages with a functional role in the evolution of the state.[41] Rejecting the birth-death-rebirth topos of Petrarch, Hegel introduced his own tripartite cultural model of history, reflecting the development of Spirit and Idea in what can be best described as an infancy-adolescence-maturity schema.[42] While this schema did not have much influence as a method of periodization, deviating significantly from the traditional ancient/medieval and medieval/modern divides, his incorporation of the Middle Ages into relevant history is critical to the postmodern discourse on temporal politics. Contrary to the *philosophes* that preceded him, Hegel championed the medieval Christian tradition over the Roman Empire, as it represented one more step toward the self-realization of the Spirit and toward the anthropological consciousness of freedom.[43] To Hegel, history was in perpetual progress, and a society of *liberté*, *egalité*, and *fraternité* was yet to come.

Implicit, though, in the continuous nature of the Hegelian dialectic, was a portrayal of the modern age as a transitional period.[44] Framed within the context of a demarcated past and a definite future, Modernity became ahistorical and nonhomogeneous to many of the nineteenth-century scholars. Just as Petrarch had decried the "middle squalor" in which he lived, so these Romantics maligned the modern times on behalf of their parenthetical character.[45] Victor Hugo, for example, after an exhausting survey of fifteenth-century Paris in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), candidly writes the following concerning the city's modern condition: "The present Paris has therefore no general physiognomy. It is a collection of specimens of several different ages, and the finest of all have disappeared."[46] Particularly egregious to Hugo was the historical eclecticism he witnessed in the nineteenth century, the remnants of the

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[40] Breisach, 228-229.

[41] Shlomo Aveneri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (1972; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 240.

[42] Besserman, 9.

[43] Aveneri, 227-228.

[44] Göran Blix, "Charting the 'Transitional Period': The Emergence of Modern Time in the Nineteenth Century," *History and Theory* 45 (February 2006): 52.

[45] Ibid., 55.

[46] Victor Hugo, *Hunchback of Notre Dame* [1831] (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), 197.

ancien régime, the Revolution, and the Empire all coexisting in one temporally pluralistic society. The modern age had no *physionomie* and no homogeneity.[47] In contrast, the medieval revivalism of the Romantic era had a decisive "homogenizing thrust."[48] Seeking to secure proper nationalist forms, especially in France, scholars synthesized the *école narrative* and the *école analytique* to give histories that both celebrated and clarified national identity.[49] Fundamentally, the movement transformed periodization methodology, defining each period by distinct traits that emerged from the historical process itself. Of course, this relativism was not without precedent. Giambattista Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova* (1725), had previously attempted to determine periods from within, employing terms such as "harmony," "correspondence," and "accommodation" throughout his discourse.[50] Likewise, theologian Johann Gottfried Herder, writing in 1774, had argued that a period should only be referenced according to its own cultural standards and not to the norms of antiquity.[51] In this respect, both Vico and Herder significantly influenced the Romantic scholars who succeeded them. Their push for relativistic periodization precipitated a vast tableau of historical inquiries, from the analytical works of Augustin Thierry and Jules Michelet to the popular novels of Walter Scott and Prosper Merimée.[52] The medieval revivalism of the nineteenth century was, at its core, a continuation of Petrarchan logic: it celebrated the distinct, homogenous periods of the past and denigrated the transitional nature of the present.

Over against the contentions of Norman F. Cantor, author of *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991), late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship was very much an extension of—and not a divergence from—this Romantic medieval revivalism, exhibiting the same "homogenizing thrust" and driven by similar pursuits of nationalism.[53] Moreover, with regards to its effect on medieval studies, the years between 1914 and 1945 differed little from those surrounding the French Revolution. According to Cantor, "Creating a medieval world picture and projecting themselves into it were one therapeutic recourse by which sensitive and benign twentieth-century people sought to regain their sanity and get control of their feelings in the times of slaughter and madness."[54] The quest to define (and escape) the transitional age of Modernity continued to

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[47] Blazac, "Complaintes satiriques sur les moeurs du temps present" [1830], in *Oeuvres diverses* (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1996), 2:740, quoted in Blix, 57-58.
[48] Blix, 52.
[49] Breisach, 239. Cf. Douglas Johnson, "Historians," in *The French Romantics*, ed. D. G. Charlton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 283.
[50] Funkenstein, 1-2.
[51] Blix, 52-53.
[52] Breisach, 239-242.
[53] Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists in the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 36. Cf. Blix, 52-53.
[54] Cantor, 43.

permeate medieval scholarship from the nineteenth through the twentieth century. In this context, English jurist and historian F. W. Maitland co-authored the seminal work entitled *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (1895). Historically interpreting the origins of English law within a medieval framework, Maitland effectively defines British national identity via the Middle Ages. For Maitland, the years between 1154 and 1272 are not inferior to Modernity but rather superior; they, unlike the obfuscated times of the present, comprise "a luminous age throwing light on both past and future."[55]

During the twentieth century, there emerged a variety of critiques regarding the placement of the ancient/medieval and medieval/modern divides, shifting the dates of those temporal divisions to make the intervening periods more homogenous. Henri Pirenne, examining ancient economic trends in his *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937), posits that the beginning of the Middle Ages should be marked by the advance of Islam and not the Germanic invasions, as it was the former that disrupted the Mediterranean unity of the ancient world.[56] Note that here, in Pirenne's depiction of the ensuing medieval period, the Romantic vocabulary of Hugo appears once again: "Europe…assumed a new physiognomy (*physionomie*)…"[57] Like Pirenne, Maitland, and the Romantics, Cantor also looks to the Middle Ages as a homogenous past that can help better define the present, and thus he too can be considered as part of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century medieval revivalism. Accordingly, based on his own perceptions of cultural frustration with the transitional nature of Modernity, Cantor concludes his work with a prediction of "retromedievalism" for the twenty-first century.[58] Cantor's prediction, however, was incorrect.

Long before twenty-first century, scholars had begun deconstructing the traditional ancient-medieval-modern schema as contemporaneous critiques of synchronic and diachronic periodization emerged in modern thought. R. G. Collingwood, an early twentieth-century English historian and philosopher, emphatically disparaged synchronic period discrimination, relating such categorizations to the respective knowledge and ignorance of the historian who invented them. In his "metaphysical epilegomena" to *The Idea of History* (1946), Collingwood wrote the following:

> Every period of which we have competent knowledge (and by competent knowledge I mean insight into its thought, not mere acquaintance with its remains) appears in the perspective of time as an age of brilliance: the brilliance being the light of our own historical

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[55] Frederick Pollock and Frederic W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd ed. (1898; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 672-673.

[56] Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1939; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1958), 284.

[57] Ibid., 285.

[58] Cantor, 411-412.

insight. The intervening periods are seen by contrast as…'dark ages':
ages which we know to have existed…but in which we can find no real
life because we cannot re-enact that thought in our minds. That this
pattern of light and darkness is an optical illusion proceeding from the
distribution of the historian's knowledge and ignorance is obvious…[59]

In turn, it was Marc Bloch, medievalist and co-founder of the *Annales* school of
history, who offered a powerful critique to periodization in terms of diachrony.
He contended that historians should "look to the phenomena themselves for the
proper periods" lest they engender absurd descriptions of events, like
"Diplomatic history of Europe from Newton to Einstein."[60] Considering, in *The
Historian's Craft* (1949), how the Middle Ages came to be separated from the
Renaissance, Bloch decried this partition and the "Voltarian stamp" that was
now borne by history. Furthermore, he derided historians for their prudent
sequencing of centuries and inevitable tendency to homogenize those events
which took place within a hundred-year span.[61] The observations of both
Collingwood and Bloch regarding problems of synchronic and diachronic
periodization set the stage for a postmodern deconstruction of the Middle Ages
and, ultimately, periods in general.

It was in response to these questions of periodization that French
theoretician Michel Foucault reformulated the problem of temporal divisions in
terms of "power and knowledge."[62] As with Collingwood's concept of
knowledge as an "illuminating agent," Foucault posits that higher, or more
empirical, orders of knowledge become increasingly discontinuous because "the
rhythm of transformation doesn't follow the smooth, continuist schemas of
development which are normally accepted."[63] Therefore, the dominant
schemata, such as the dialogues of Augustine, Petrarch, and Hegel, only
achieved their supremacy via the exclusion of other dialogues, ones which did
not conform to the established pattern.[64] Foucault, subsequently, sought to
dismantle these structures. His impetus was not unique but rather drew from a
close reading of the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who,
along with Foucault, inscribed himself into his own historical narrative as a
millennial moment, dismantling the older constructs to make way for a new
order of thinking.[65] Foucault's definition of the period, found in his *Archaeology*

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[59] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 327-328.

[60] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* [1949], trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 183.

[61] Ibid., 179-182.

[62] Besserman, 13.

[63] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: Random House-Pantheon, 1984), 51, quoted in Besserman, 14.

[64] Breisach, 337.

[65] Besserman, 10, 16.

of Knowledge (1969), corresponds directly to this deconstructionist ideology: "The *period* is neither its basic unity, nor its horizon, nor its object: if it speaks of these things it is always in terms of discursive practices, and as a result of its analyses."[66] In other words, like the periodization schemata, the period itself is superficial; if it ever achieves homogeneity or distinction, it only does so through the exclusion of historical knowledge. Hence, Johannes Fabian affirms, "there is a 'Politics of Time.'"[67] Concerning medieval scholarship, the philosophy of Foucault undeniably propelled twenty-first-century efforts to deconstruct the Middle Ages, conveying with it the simple notion that, by remembering the Middle Ages, one simultaneously forgets all outlying phenomena.

Postmodern discourse on the Petrarchan tripartite periodization of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity has, in recent years, adopted for its use the geographic terms of colonization/ decolonization. Many scholars of the twenty-first century now contend that time, like land, can be and has been colonized for the purposes of political domination and exploitation.[68] In addition, these postcolonial analyses reveal that the temporal colonization of the Middle Ages helped foster the territorial imperialism that characterizes the modern age. The Petrarchan construction of an irrational and superstitious medieval period identified later colonial subjects by similar pejorative terms."[69] In the same manner that Petrarch and the Renaissance scholars denied the "coevalness [sic]" of the Middle Ages, so too the conquering Europeans denied the native histories of the lands they colonized.[70] To a great extent, as Kathleen Davis argues in her *Periodization and Sovereignty* (2008), these derogatory conceptions of the "other" continue to plague popular modern thought, exemplified by NPR's use of the term "feudalism" cited above.[71] However, the relationship between the Middle Ages and Modernity is interdependent, and, as triumphalism and nationalism cease to be prevailing ideologies in academia, the concepts of "medievalism" and "modernism" will, likewise, cease to exist in the scholarly sphere, except possibly as the discursive formations of Foucault. John Dagenais, co-author of "Decolonizing the Middle Ages" (2000), writes that medievalism, being the "creation of a certain form of modernity…cannot survive the demise of that form of modernity—nor should we expect it to."[72] A certain set of politics comprises the ancient-medieval-modern periodization

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[66] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969] *and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 176.

[67] Fabian, xl.

[68] Dagenais, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," 431.

[69] Davis, 20.

[70] John Dagenais, "The Postcolonial Laura," *Modern Language Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (September 2004): 367.

[71] Davis, 32-34.

[72] Dagenais, "The Postcolonial Laura," 367-378.

schema, and, when those political forces no longer retain their sovereignty, the structures established under their rule collapse.

It is, therefore, the task of the modern historian to sail between Scylla and Charybdis, between the extremes of nihilism and naïve teleology. On the one hand, the total deconstruction of historical paradigms would effectively reduce history to entropic nothingness. If scholars are to define historical events by the "phenomena themselves," then what is the definition of an event? Bede, in his eighth-century treatise *On Times*, explicated and delineated time's smallest unit: the moment (*momentum*).[73] Yet, postmodern thought deconstructs even this foundational unit of periodization, it being irrational to decry the century and preserve the second. Indeed, by deconstructing the "moments" of the past, postmodern scholars implicitly sketch the continuum of history as one infinite transitional period, nonhomogeneous and ahistorical.[74] On the other hand, temporal divisions do have political agendas, and often they are used to dominate and exploit subaltern traditions. In this respect, the Middle Ages have served amphibiously, employed by both eighteenth-century triumphalists to celebrate Modernity and nineteenth-century Romantics to malign it. Most of all, though, the act of periodization engenders a dangerous "homogenizing thrust," a desire to fit a host of incongruous events into a singularly progressive narrative. Searching for a temporal sovereign (that is, a means of temporal division), the historian creates his own. In the words of Michel de Certeau, "[Periodization] promotes a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility."[75] Ergo, periodization is useful but also dangerous, and the modern historian must approach his subject—be it the Middle Ages or any other period—with open eyes.

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[73] Bede, *On the Nature of Things and On Times* [8th century], trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 107.

[74] Blix, 56.

[75] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* [1975], trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 4.