

THE MIDDLE AGES

(JOHANNES FRIED)

January 27, 2018

It is universally accepted today that the Dark Ages are a myth, roughly as believable as the Australian bunyip. In fact, medieval Europe was far more dynamic and far more intelligent than it was once portrayed. Certainly, post-Roman Europe underwent material decline, and it temporarily lost the high culture, and high thought, of Rome. But soon enough it began to rebound and expand, both geographically and mentally. Johannes Fried's main theme in this book, which covers A.D. 500–1500, is the rebirth of “mental acuity and of methodically controlled thinking” in the West, and the creation thereby of a new thing, from which the modern world is made.

The bridge over which this passage was made was the Church, both in its institutions and its thought. Even so, if one theme characterizes the events in this book, it is the never-ending conflict between the Church and state for supremacy. This paradox is the skeleton of *The Middle Ages*; the flesh is the individuals whom Fried chooses to exemplify both their time and the progress of thought in medieval Europe. It is all very well done, although I didn't enjoy this book as much as Fried's *Charlemagne*—maybe that book hung together better because it was narrower in time and focus, or maybe the translation (from the original German) was punchier in that book. And if you know nothing about the Middle Ages, you will be lost if you start here (especially because the focus is on continental Europe, to the near total exclusion of England, reversing the common balance in English-language survey texts). Moreover, at times this book is on the plodding side, and although it's ultimately a rewarding plod, you're probably not going to leap from your bed in the morning eager to pick up again at page 523.

Fried's main focus is not the tired Mediterranean lands, rather the Franks and their successors. But the first person he profiles is Boethius, minister to and executed by the Ostrogoth king Theodoric, in Ravenna, in northern Italy. Fried credits Boethius with beginning the European recapture and development of high rational thought, in his transmission of and commentary on Aristotle's *Organon*, by his employing and developing concepts of the logical order behind the world (and incidentally

coining the term *quadrivium*), and through the “internal dialogue” of his more famous *Consolation of Philosophy*, written while waiting for the hangman. Then, turning to the Franks, Fried discusses their shadowy origins, and the career of Pope Gregory the Great, around whom the author weaves discussion of the Lombards (critical mostly because of the later anti-Lombard alliance between the papacy and the Franks, who geographically were on the other side of the Lombards from the Pope) and of the rise of Islam, and its defeat at Poitiers, with that battle legitimizing Charles Martel’s authority.

Next comes Charlemagne, where Fried emphasizes his role in developing education, high learning, libraries, reasoning, distinctions between the public and private realms of the king, and the roots of scientific thinking, “extensively promoted by the monarchy and the church.” He began the European tradition of receptiveness to new ideas and new things. Fried also notes the role of Charlemagne’s queen(s), “who played a leading role in the administration of the royal estate,” a common arrangement in the West, unthinkable in the East. From here, the book expands its gaze, turning to England, Spain, and the Vikings, though it focuses most of all on a variety of German kings, as well as the increasingly separate French kings. The book travels quite quickly to the tenth century, where Fried’s thesis is that this era “like no other era before or since in European history grappled with logic and dialectics.” Thus, the origin of the Renaissance is here, supported by a line of mostly religious thinkers since Boethius, and receiving its embryonic form at the millennium. They “pointed the way forward to a reason-based future,” not least by their rescuing of and interpretation of ancient manuscripts “held in the archives of Byzantium and by the Arabs”—whom Fried points out did not show “the slightest interest in [those] treasures,” leaving it up to both famous and anonymous figures of the Christian Middle Ages to incorporate that knowledge into their own proto-modern thinking.

Threaded throughout are endless smaller discussions of topics that I find fascinating. We learn about Manegold of Lautenbach, who argued that tyrants could be deposed by the people (not only by the Pope); Marsilius of Padua, who held much the contrary, and denigrated the temporal power of the papacy; and Petrus Johannes Olivi, who claimed that Christ was utterly poor in material goods and that so should the

Church and the religious orders be, not even owning goods in common, and who inspired the Fraticelli. We get discussions of papal schisms, and then some more discussions of papal schisms. We get details of the *Reconquista*, and of pilgrimage routes. We learn a great deal about the growth of nominalism, often blamed by today's conservatives for many of the philosophical problems of the modern world. Not for Fried, though, endless coverage of battles and dates. Of those we get very few. His focus is on intellectual history, and people rate inclusion in his history primarily for their effects on the European march to a globally unique way of thinking.

These topics bounce back and forth among longer profiles of more individuals and movements: Peter Abelard (and Héloïse); Frederick Barbarossa; Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, who was bold one time too many and ended up hacked to death by the Swiss on the battlefield; popes too numerous to count; Waldes of Lyons (founder of the Waldensians, "the sole medieval heresy to have survived right up to the present day"); numerous religious orders; William of Ockham; Meister Eckhart; Petrarch; and much more. Throughout this the theme of growing intellectual capability continues, given new impetus not only by original thought but also by the Crusades and the Mongols, and the subsequent new knowledge of the world, with consequent new "intellectual flexibility and spatial mobility."

As with *Charlemagne*, a constant theme of Fried's writing is on the universal medieval focus on the Apocalypse, assumed to be imminent and requiring each man and king to look sharp that his soul might not be taken unawares, and that as many people as possible might be saved from the wrath to come. Perhaps he mentions it a little too much, but perhaps not, since this is a window into how people thought, and it shows how differently they thought from us. Not less competently, but with different emphases and premises. Those who favor economic determinism, or class struggle, or other mechanistic explanations for how the mighty act may find this difficult to accept, but within their premises, the actions of medieval men made perfect sense. They were not stupider than us; in fact, they were probably smarter, because they had to be. They just saw the world through different eyes, and with a less complete set of tools.

Fried ends the book with talking about the start of the Renaissance, in the culmination of a millennium of increasingly sophisticated thought, along with innumerable technological advances, from compasses to bronze castings to a rational monetary economy. (This is not a book about technology, which features only in passing. Fried ignores who invented the compass, although a few seconds' research will reveal that the statement it was invented by the Chinese rests on very slim evidence, but he notes that all useful application of the compass was done by Europeans, along with ancillary, but critical, scientific discoveries like magnetic declination.) None of this would have been possible without the groundwork that began at the time of Boethius and was carried through by others over the centuries. Fried offers an excellent Epilogue (which the reader should probably read first), in which he muses in wonder why, since the Enlightenment, educated opinion has viewed the Middle Ages with distaste. "This attitude is a curious phenomenon; no other advanced civilization on Earth has ever dismissed and denigrated a period of its own past so comprehensively, or even wished to airbrush it out of existence entirely through neglect, in the way Europeans have done with the medieval era." And, "Not least, then, freedom—political and social freedom, and freedom of thought—may be counted as a signal achievement of those much-maligned centuries of the Middle Ages, for they laid the theoretical foundation of such a concept through their recourse to the notion of 'free will.'" This, perhaps, is the key take-away—the idea that the modern world is the result of the Enlightenment is largely a fiction, in that freedom and many other things claimed by the Enlightenment, from rule of law to the rights of the individual to scientific advancement, actually arose before the Enlightenment, whose main gift was untrammelled freedom, the atomistic effects of which are now destroying the society so painstakingly built by the men and women whom Fried profiles in this book.