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Since the end of the 18th century, the Middle Ages were, in the learned culture of European elites, much more than simply a historical period. Rather, they came to serve as the focal point for a complex set of desires. From the early 19th to the mid-20th-century, the Middle Ages were understood as the lost realm of collective identity, “truth”, “authenticity” and “moral unity”. All over Europe, the timespan from the 10th to the early 16th century provided texts, images and artefacts for national foundation narratives and idealized and heavily moralized political fables. How can we describe and analyse these phenomena, and what followed their decline after 1945?

Keywords: Middle Ages, national histories, medievalism, Europe, 19th century, 20th century.

Raízes, réplica, repetição: medievalismos europeus após 1945

Desde o fim do século XVIII, a Idade Média foi, na cultura letrada das elites europeias, muito mais que um simples período histórico. Ela serviu de ponto de enfoque para um conjunto complexo de desejos. Desde o início do século XIX até meados do século XX, a Idade Média foi entendida como o reino perdido da identidade coletiva, da “verdade”, “autenticidade” e “unidade moral”. Por toda a Europa, o período de tempo entre o século X e o início do século XVI forneceu textos, imagens e artefactos para narrativas de fundação nacional e fábulas políticas idealizadas e fortemente moralizadas. Como é que estes fenómenos podem ser descritos e analisados, e o que se seguiu ao seu declínio depois de 1945?

Palavras-chave: Idade Média, histórias nacionais, medievalismo, Europa, século XIX, século XX.

Roots, Replica, Replay: European Medievalisms after 1945

Valentin Groebner*

Two or three times a year, the phone in my office rings, and a journalist asks my expert opinion on the ongoing, no: surging popularity of the Middle Ages in the 21st century. “Why so many medieval spectacles, living medieval history-markets and re-enactments, re-staged tournaments and battles?”, he asks. Why the apparently deeply popular and irresistible funky fascination with a long-gone period with a reputation of darkness, superstition and violence, five, seven or nine centuries ago? I teach medieval history, but the journalists call me because I have written, a couple of years ago, a book with a bold statement in its title: “Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf” - The Middle Ages never stop.

Yet it did; and when the journalist is in a hurry and wants a crisp, short, one-line response, my reply is: “Because it is so utterly difficult to leave the 19th century behind.” The notion of “the Medieval” as a formula for intense and high-pitched emotional impressions took shape in the learned literary imagination of the Romantics of the last third of the 18th century. With “romantic” I mean a particular style of subjectivity, the use of one’s own emotions as instruments of knowledge and cognition. An ambitious young writer named Johann Wolfgang Goethe urged his readers in 1773 to look at the huge dark façade of the 14th century Strasbourg cathedral: “Go there and plunge yourself into this deepest feeling of beauty and truth, born out of the roughest strongest centre of the German soul”¹. Similar invocations spread all over Europe: from Germany and Switzerland to France and England, mutually influ-

* Universität Luzern

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, „Von Deutscher Baukunst“ (1773), in *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst* (Stuttgart: G. J.Götschen’sche Verlagshandlung, 1892), 90.

encing and reinforcing themselves, from novels and poems to painted fantasies – like Schinkel’s imagined picturesque cathedral (Figure 1) – to newly-built ruins and country houses as containers of the alleged intensity of the past.



Figure 1: Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Gotischer Dom am Wasser*, 1813. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Since then, the Middle Ages stopped being simply a period. They became a feeling – one’s own feeling. For the members of the learned elite, they were an apparatus for creating and reinforcing one’s own emotions – a self-imagined past as a “mood organ”, to borrow a phrase from the 1950s-Science Fiction-writer Philipp K. Dick who imagined such a device in every household that could procure strong sentiments at the owner’s will. Public readings of re-discovered medieval poetry

and stagings of plays with a medieval cast were understood as means of forging strong, pure, and fresh sensations among the audience. This could take very different forms. The poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, also known as Novalis, gave, in his 1799 speech “Christendom or Europe” the Middle Ages a distinctly religious meaning, praising the Catholic church of the 11th and 12th century as a perfect holistic and all-encompassing social body and an incorporation of social harmony – only to be destroyed and corrupted by nominalism and self-destructive doubts already in the 14th century. In the same vein, René de Chateaubriand had praised in his influential “Génie du Christianisme” of 1802 Gothic architecture and medieval epics as inexhaustible cultural treasures for future generations².

The overwhelming majority of the interpretations of the medieval period from the 1830s onward, however, laid their emphasis not on religious matters but on a literary and political agenda for which the Middle Ages served as an inexhaustible storehouse of foundation narratives for one’s own respective national culture. In most cases, these narratives concentrated on the identification of a limited number national heroes – kings and noblemen, in most cases – as personifications of the nation’s virtues; they also included increasingly artworks and texts in the literary vernacular. The canonization of Dante Alighieri in the Italian context is a particularly impressive example, but other medieval poets in other languages enjoyed very similar careers, including some whose allegedly medieval masterworks turned out, a couple of decades later, to be completely made-up and fictitious. The newly formed European states of the 19th century were in need of such new old roots and cultural foundations, and practically all of them found them in the Middle Ages.

Seen from a distance of 150 years, the motives and formulas for creating a proper and unique national medieval past all over Europe strong-

² Michael Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot: French Romantic medievalism and the Arthurian tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995); Elizabeth A. Fay, *Romantic Medievalism. History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* (Houndmills: Palgrave UK, 2002); Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (New York: Palgrave US, 2011).

ly resemble each other. However stark the actual differences in political structure and development between, say 19th-century Denmark and Hungary were, Germany and France, Serbia and Norway, the respective catalogue of saintly kings, female heroines as personification of collective virtues and allegedly identity-forming battles – lost or won – between the 10th and the 14th century as foundations myths now look very similar to us. However unique the meanings of the respective medieval event were understood to be, the forms in which they were promulgated in the 19th and early 20th century were, minor differences apart, everywhere the same: historical novels; plays; celebratory spectacles and feasts for the centenary of the battle, the birth, coronation or death of the hero or heroine in question – and with the explosion of printing technology in colours from the 1880s on, an avalanche of popularized images for the broad public, soon to be supplemented by photo postcards and movies. The history of European medievalisms is thus a history of its representation and dissemination in the brand-new media of the long 19th century. An Italian advertisement poster of 1912 placed the medieval poet Dante Alighieri at a shiny new Olivetti typewriter (Figure 2).

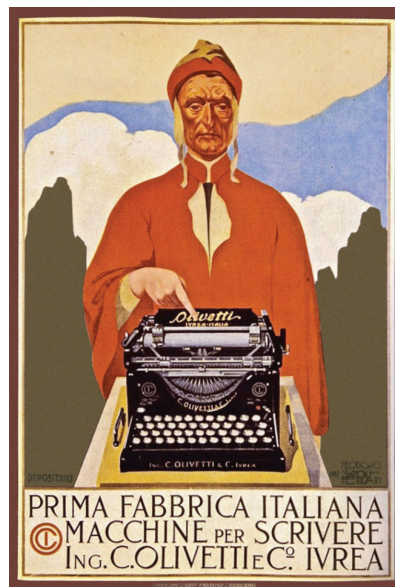


Figure 2: Dante advertising for Olivetti, 1912. <http://www.italianways.com>

With industrialization gathering speed in wide stretches of Central and Western Europe, most bigger cities changed their shape, size and outward appearance dramatically within a couple of decades: Century-old medieval fortifications, city gates and towers vanished more or less everywhere between the 1830s and the 1860s, medieval city centres underwent drastic changes. The appraisal of the nation's glorious medieval past thus went hand in hand with the destruction of remaining medieval structures, a much-deplored fact by the propagators and defenders of the heroic national past. The history of the huge enterprises of saving, restoring and reconstructing medieval monuments in the 19th century, from Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to his successors, is by now well established and thoroughly researched. It runs parallel to the equally well-documented history of erecting completely new medieval buildings. The phenomenon ranges from completing unfinished medieval churches (Figure 3) and cathedrals – all but two gothic cathedrals in the German-speaking realm got their impressive towers and spires only in the last decades of the 19th century, as you know – to wonderful neo-gothic fantasies, ruins, castles, medieval towns built from scratch.³

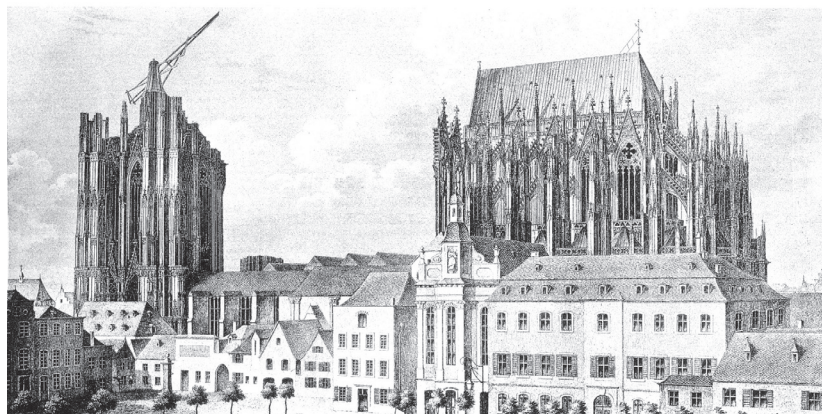


Figure 3: The unfinished Cologne cathedral, 1824. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

³ *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. by Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), with abundant examples.

My favourite example is the “Vajdahunyad vára” (Figure 4) in Budapest, built in the late 1890s as an enlarged copy and remix of four different existing 14th- and 15th-century castles for the Industrial exposition in the booming Hungarian metropolis, with a station for the new underground trains below. It is not by chance that whenever I show this image in my university lectures, my students so easily mistake this building to the Zürich National Museum erected in the same years next to another huge railway station: Both wilfully designed as neo-gothic examples of high modernity and the latest technology. Neo-gothic buildings became, all over Europe, the dominant architectural style of the Industrial revolution in full swing. To this day, in the realm of popular culture, these new 19th century-designs are, we may say, the real Middle Ages, at least in terms of success: The four medieval castles most popular with visitors in Germany today were all four created in the last three decades of the 19th century.



Figure 4: Vajdahunyad Castle, Budapest. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

What I want to highlight is the lesser studied paradox between the multiplication of medieval monuments, texts, spectacles, the media

surge of the decades between 1850 and 1900 that, in fact, popularized and multiplied texts and images of the Middle Ages everywhere, and the strong feelings of loss – or, as we may put it, structurally institutionalized melancholy – always also present in the 19th-century invocations of the Medieval Past, be it religious or heroic-national. However strong anticlerical sentiments were in the 19th century, both variants of conjuring and representing the Middle coexisted and mutually reinforced each other, not only in the Catholic, but also in the Protestant parts of Europe. These invocations of allegedly medieval roots served many ends: but however intense – and costly – the efforts to restore, reconstruct, re-establish the heroic past of the 11th, 13th or 15th centuries, it somehow remained inaccessible.



Figure 5: Replica of the 12th-century “Bamberger Reiter” at the entrance of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, 2004

In spite of all the monuments, novels, feasts, representations as detailed, sumptuous and lavishly funded as you might wish, a particular aspect of the medieval past persisted – its *goneness*. The multiplication of the Middle Ages never made the phantom pain go away that went along with them. The heroic epoch never seems to have been able to fully satisfy the desires it evoked in its admirers. It remained

“*unvollendet*”, as the German word goes, forever unaccomplished, unfulfilled, and even more because it was heavily freighted with notions of completeness, moral unity, social harmony and, above all, authenticity and inner truth – now forever lost.

I think that this phenomenon – the impossibility of the Revival of the Middle Ages already installed in the project – deserves closer and more systematic attention than it has yet found among scholars of medievalism. I cannot help the suspicion that the protagonists of medievalism in the 19th and early 20th century were fully aware of what they were doing: is it possible that they made deliberate use of this melancholic *impossibleness* as both a rhetoric device and a source of negative energy? The very special Middle Ages they created was represented as glorious and triumphant – the very origins of the nation’s values; a storehouse of cultural treasures. Yet, it had a dark side as well, its tragic shadow: the realm of the past they so powerfully evoked was a kingdom of the Offended and Disappointed; a territory inhabited by those that felt they had been left behind by more recent events. Their notion of supremacy – the conjuring of a mythical medieval past ruled by one’s own ancestors – was often tinted with masochism: “we suffer now”, their secret (or not so secret) motto went, “because we were the descendents of the pure and chosen ones, then”.

Pedro Martins, in his dissertation of the uses of the Middle Ages in Portugal in the 19th and early 20th century, has beautifully laid out the highly ambivalent notions of this glorious past as both the reason for national splendour and national decline into “*decadência*”⁴. You find very similar paradoxes and ambiguities in the 19th century commemorations of medieval victories in Switzerland and in the visions of Nazi historians of the early 1930s for the rebirth of the German Reich to medieval greatness – a greatness that, according to their own terms, had been corrupted and undermined already in the second half of the 13th century⁵. The historians’ search for medieval origins as powerful and pure as possible produced

4 Pedro Alexandre Guerreiro Martins, “History, Nation and Politics: the Middle Ages in Modern Portugal (1890-1947)” (PhD diss., Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2016).

5 F. Link-M.W. Hornburg, “He Who Owns the Trifels, Owns the Reich”: Nazi Medievalism and the Creation of the Volksgemeinschaft in the Palatinate”, *Central European history* 49, no. 2 (2016): 208-39.

contaminated, adulterated, flawed pre-histories of future greatness. We should not simply dismiss these writers as simpletons. They weren't; and in many cases, they seem to have been aware of the negative dialectics they found themselves in. Exploring the Middle Ages was a national duty, and yet it wrecked the promise of a return to medieval glory in the future. So much for the interdependencies of history and science fiction.

In 1945, the long, long 19th century project of Dreaming – and Reviving – the Middle Ages was over. Not only in Germany, for obvious reasons, but all over Europe. With the exception of a mere handful of exceptions (the cemetery for the German soldiers fallen in the battle of El Alamein being one of them), no more neo-romanesque or neo-gothic buildings or monuments were commissioned after the Second World War. Yet medievalism, the evocation of the Middle Ages as “organic”, “holistic”, human” contrasted with an allegedly cold and mechanic modern industrial world, made a lively reappearance at the end of the 1970s, mostly in the New Left in England, France and Germany, together with Romantic notions of authenticity and naturalness and spiritual and religious overtones. (It is quite an interesting, and puzzling, concept that a specific historical epoch should be more “natural” than others – what about Late Antiquity, then?) On the other side of the political spectrum, aggressive nationalist identity politics focussing on “medieval roots” and commemorations of medieval battles reappeared at the end of the 1980s, with Slobodan Milosevic’s infamous speech at Kosovo Polje in 1989 that help to start the Yugoslavian civil wars and the foundation of the Italian “*Lega Nord*”, commemorating the victory of Legnano in the 12th century. Today, it is easy to add further examples of political instrumentalisation of the Middle Ages from the European far right, from Bulgaria and Hungary to Austria, Switzerland, the French “Front National” and the Scottish National Party that has officially declared the 13th-century freedom fighter William Wallace – starring in the movie “*Braveheart*” by the Australian Mel Gibson of 1995 – its patron and founder.⁶

⁶ See for a fuller and more detailed account the engaging Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo Militante. La politica di oggi alle prese con barbari e crociate* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011).

But compared with their forerunners in the 19th century, all these forms of medievalism – however unpleasant – remain of marginal influence compared to another, third and completely new way of reviving and representing the Middle Ages.

Today, referring to the Middle Ages means entertainment and tourism. It means re-enactment and remake, with a visual vocabulary and media resonance quite similar to those novels, plays, staging's, movies in the late 19th and early 20th century I have mentioned. But there is one fundamental difference. Representing medieval history today comes not as a quest for truth and authenticity, but deliberately as masquerade, play, pretending, doing as if. It looks not for “moral unity” or “wholeness”, but for fragmentation, decoration and the pleasure of recombining colourful elements from a wide array of many different Middle Ages. The by-gone epoch they visualize appears no more as a “distant mirror”, to borrow the title from an influential book from the 1970s on the 14th century⁷. Rather, it is a sort of kaleidoscope and supermarket shelf from which the users are invited to make their own choices, as heterogeneous as possible – also in this respect, we might be closer to our forerunners in the 18th and 19th centuries than we tend to think⁸. Vikings or crusader knights, sultans or conquistadors, these new representations of the Middle Ages not only allow, but openly encourage the fast switching of roles and codes in an open-ended carnival of re-arranged self-made pasts.

7 Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

8 Angela Jane Weisl, *The persistence of Medievalism: narrative adventures in contemporary culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Nicholas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: the imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: the methods of cinema and history in portraying the Medieval world* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).



Figure 6: Austrian far-right politician Jörg Haider posing as medieval knight



Figure 7: Medieval festival, Berlin, 2008



Figure 8: Website of the “chantier medieval” of Guédelon. <http://www.guedelon.fr/de/>



Figure 9: Assassin's Creed computer game, issued first in 2007.



Figure 10: Tournament toys, photograph of the author

It is the playful, stagy, histrionic mode of re-appropriating history that has come to dominate every visualization of the Middle Ages in the media sphere of the 21st century. Its message is simple and straightforward. The Middle Ages are no longer a subterranean treasure or well of origin, depth, authenticity or “truth”. They are a repertory for decoration, a multi-level video game, a costume agency in which everybody can – at least theoretically – slip into every role he or she desires, and then leave it again. I would call this the touristic mode of memory. We, as professional historians, might not particularly appreciate the openly consumerist attitude that goes along with it. But would we prefer the return to sacred values and strict national duties of remembrance in the name of an inaccessible past forever lost?

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