Europe and the Middle Ages

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EUROPE
AND
THE MIDDLE AGES

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To my brother Jack,
and to Ann, Heather, and John,
in memory of

EDWARD LOUIS PETERS
(1964–1981)

Preface

As individual human beings, we have not lived, and cannot remember, very much of the past. As participants in a culture, however, we share the artificial memory of that culture, and as the character of our culture changes, we make different demands upon its artificial memory—the study of history. Each generation or two, we require that history be made intelligible in a different way and that this intelligibility relate in some way to our own lives, experience, and image of ourselves. At one time in our past, the artificial memory was expected to produce lists and adventures of important folk—kings, generals, heroes, and other sorts of "great men." By their actions, it was thought, as if by the actions of a kind of social spark plug, the "historical events" of an age were ignited. Somewhat later—in fact relatively recently—our culture required us to know not so much about great men as about ordinary men, women, and children—how they lived, what their values were, how they fared economically, how they felt themselves members of larger communities and whole cultures. Today we make rather extensive demands of the study of history, and because that history has been put to such different uses, there are many different methods for finding out about—and explaining—the past.

Different methods of historical investigation and explanation came into existence precisely because of the different questions about the past that people asked. In the late fourteenth century, as the last chapter of this book will tell, a number of literary moralists asked why the great power of the Roman Empire collapsed around A.D. 500, or, as the greatest successor they ever had, Edward Gibbon, put it, why the Roman Empire "de-

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clined and fell.'' These men themselves thought that in their own time they had managed to revive, or give rebirth to, many of the values of ancient Rome. They came to call their own age (from about the year 1350 or so) the period of rebirth, ''the Renaissance'' of Roman and, later, Greek values. With the glories of ancient Rome at one end, and the perceived glories of revived Roman and Greek culture at the other, the period from 500 to 1350 acquired a kind of negative shape. What seemed to be conspicuous about it was its ''un-Romanness,'' between two periods of ''Romanness.'' And so people took to calling it ''Middle''—middle between two more admirable periods of human energy, order, and achievement.

Religious reformers in the early sixteenth century added to this picture their accusations that at the end of the Roman Empire a kind of true, evangelical Christianity had been perverted and was not purified until their own time. This view reinforced the first definition of the Middle Ages. It was reinforced in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by thinkers who sensed that even if their age had not quite re-created ancient Greece and Rome, it had done something even better—it had created a greater civilization.

None of these three points of view had much good to say about—or reason to change the name of—the Middle Ages. By the criteria of Romanness, reformed Christian values, and the idea of progress, the Middle Ages were indeed the middle—or, as many others called the period, rusty, monkish, leaden, dull, and barbarous.

On the other hand, the thinkers who seemed to defend some of the values of the Middle Ages appeared to represent precisely those elements in early modern European culture that resisted improvement and progress—the forces of royalism, ecclesiastical coercion, aristocratic privilege, or, as the first American medieval historian, Henry Charles Lea, once called them, ''Superstition and Force.''

The questions that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans asked about the past were: How did political liberty grow out of savage repression? How did toleration and freedom of conscience grow out of ecclesiastical intolerance and narrow-minded superstition? How did backwardness change to progress? None of these questions did anything to improve the image of the Middle Ages, although the process of answering some of them—and arguing against the answers of others—produced some good history and, even more important, some critical historical methodology.

By the end of the eighteenth century a large mass of historical materials, from physical ruins to documents, had accumulated in Europe, and the methods for using these materials to gain a clearer picture of the past had developed, often independently of the value judgments that had shaped historical questions. With the growth of historical research and teaching as a profession in the early years of the nineteenth century, a subtle change came over the nature of the questions people asked about the past. People did not immediately change the values with which they framed their questions, but they did not let those values dictate the methods they used to find their answers. Moreover, some of the values of the period between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries were under attack. Both of these conditions permitted freer investigation of a thousand-year period that had come to seem too long and too full of important events and foundations of later history to be ignored or scorned as cavalierly as before.

By the mid nineteenth century three events had taken place that made this question even more pressing. First, a series of political revolutions from 1756 to 1848 had made even the political world of early modern Europe—a world ruled by kings and aristocrats—seem remote and oppressive. Political questions came to include such non-

political elements as national or ethnic character, and common language and history—collective identity. The answers to these questions clearly lay in the very period when historical Europe, with its historical peoples, came into existence—the Middle Ages.

Second, the two industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century seemed to change the lives of more people so drastically, to increase wealth on such an immense scale, and to change the very nature of economic experience so thoroughly, that the differences between the Middle Ages and the period that followed seemed to shrink, especially in comparison with the great changes caused by industrialization and "modernization." Social thinkers began to speak of *preindustrial* and *industrial* societies, reducing the differences between shorter periods to virtual insignificance.

Third, by the nineteenth century Europeans had discovered just how large the world was and how diverse its peoples and cultures and religions were. This knowledge confronted them with two choices: either they could assume that the family of humans was hopelessly fragmented, with many peoples barely qualifying as "human" at all, or they could find some scale by which to measure the different kinds of humanity they encountered. The first choice led to a particular kind of outright racism, the second to anthropology. Nineteenth-century ideas of progress, genetic evolution, and the comparative study of culture types produced a model of world human society that accounted for the size and diversity of the world's cultures.

Using "developed," "industrialized," politically "liberal," and religiously "rational" Europe as their measure, thinkers began to classify other societies as "developed" or "underdeveloped" according to the degree to which they resembled Europe—or some earlier stage of European development. Here too the Middle Ages became important; it was part of the measuring scale by which Europeans judged the rest of the world.

Neither the opposition of thinkers between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries nor the interest of thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was entirely free from bias. In the first group, literary, moral, and religious values distorted the assessment of the historical evidence. In the work of the second group, a Euro-centrism that seemed to patronize contemporary "underdeveloped" peoples and peoples in the past often shaped the questions and answers about human society that scholars asked. Romantic readers of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels that were set in the Middle Ages, and aesthetes who insisted upon having medieval ruins in their gardens even when this meant building ruins on purpose, trivialized medieval culture by their uncritical admiration of it, just as social scientists distorted it by using it illegitimately as a scale for measuring other cultures.

Throughout this process of changing cultural demand, historical scholars had slowly, and sometimes painfully, improved their techniques for handling evidence, from the reading of ancient languages and difficult documents to the realization that what people called "politics," "economics," "social class," and "religion" often meant different things in the past, and touched different areas of life and thought. The discipline of historical study—and historical criticism based on a professional methodology—had come into its own. History, the artificial memory of a culture, could no longer be turned quite so easily to the service of fashionable ideas, ideology, or confessional wrangling.

But history has never entirely freed itself from the undisciplined uses to which cultures often still wish to put it. Supporters of one modern ideology or another still insist that "history" proves them right and everyone else wrong. For nonhistorical reasons,

others deny the historicity of events whose factual character is massively documented—most recently, the truth of the Holocaust, but generally anything that might be embarrassing, inconsistent with their view of the world, or merely inconvenient. Still others, in a timid and bland ignorance of historical differences, deny the use of the rich detail of the historical past, claiming that critical history is merely ''names and dates.'' Instead they wish to homogenize all human history to the point at which important differences and the richness of different cultural traditions vanish entirely into a vague and timeless world in which ''structures'' and ''models'' and ''statistical measurement'' replace human beings as history's characters. In the twentieth century the discipline of history had become almost an art of intellectual self-defense; if we do not use it properly, others will use it, usually against us.

The history of historical study and method has produced a particular kind of knowledge—historical knowledge—that can be tested rationally and critically and yet still respond to the questions that our culture asks it, even if it must sometimes insist that the questions be rephrased and that it cannot produce the kind of knowledge the questioner insists upon. Any discipline must recognize those questions it cannot answer and the kind of knowledge it is unable to produce. This sense of the limits of historical knowledge is also a defense against the misuse of history by those who do not respect its critical and disciplined character. And that observation leads us to the character of historical knowledge—in this case medieval historical knowledge—as our culture understands it today.

Like other situations in which professionals inform nonprofessionals, the configuration of historical study must range between two poles: the detailed research of the specialist, about which few nonspecialists care to know in detail, and the ''living past,'' the common received opinion of the past that most members of a culture have at any particular time in their own lives. In that part of the human past with which this book deals, the first is represented by a host of complex techniques for dating and authenticating manuscripts, reconstructing population figures, and interpreting many kinds of sources that are no longer produced by modern societies, such as saints' lives and local diocesan liturgical calendars. The second is represented by the ''popular'' ideas about knights and ladies, the predominance of ecclesiastical institutions over many aspects of daily life, and perhaps—to lay the term out and have done with it—''the Dark Ages.'' There is always a vast distance between the two poles in any culture, but the Middle Ages in general has suffered most because of it.

For its name has stuck. In spite of the entirely new picture of the Middle Ages in Europe that historical study has created in the last century, popular imagination and scholarly convenience have preserved the name ''Middle'' for a period that witnessed the beginning of a distinctive European civilization, created out of old and new elements by people who arrived and settled in Europe in its early stages and whose descendants are still there. Modern Europeans and Americans are *not* the only cultural descendants of ancient Greece and Rome, but we are the *only* descendants of medieval Europe.

We cannot remember that past, but the discipline of historical study permits us to know about it all that is possible to know. Human beings live in time, but, as novelists and physicists continually remind us, we perceive our own passage through time in subjective and distorted ways. Perhaps there is no other way to live through time. But historical study has created an intellectual tool that permits us to observe other people living in time without the distortion that prevented them, and often prevents us, from perceiving what living in time means. At one level, perhaps the most important, we are able to experience

time and to understand, however incompletely, that our experience of time may be measured in other ways, and that the study of history sharpens that awareness and elaborates our individual and collective self-consciousness.

The study of any period of history will do this, for this is what historical study does best. In this book a particular segment of the intelligible past, isolated from early value judgments based on nonhistorical criteria, as well as from ideology, confessionalism, and the reductionism and blandness of static social science, is described in terms that have been tested, criticized, and required to be intelligible to interested readers in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The description will constitute a part of artificial memory, cultural memory. Its aim is to bridge the gap between specialized historical research and "the living past" that this culture maintains. The author—and the professional readers who have looked over his shoulder, kindly critical—have done their homework. It is time for the readers to get on with theirs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

EDWARD PETERS

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PART

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EUROPE AND
THE WORLD OF ANTIQUITY

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The Beginning and End
of the Roman Peace

GREECE, ROME, AND THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

Between 750 and 550 B.C. the city-states and kingdoms of Greece and Phoenicia situated along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean basin began to send out settlers and found colonies westward across the Mediterranean Sea. By 400 B.C. the coast of the Mediterranean from Morocco and Spain to Syria was dotted with city-states, each linked to its cultural homeland by well-traveled sea routes, and each widening the world that Greeks and Phoenicians regarded as their own. Because the Mediterranean is a sea with similar coastal areas, its shores were relatively easy to colonize. The colonization movement produced two great results. First, the former Phoenician colony of Carthage in North Africa became the center of a prosperous seaborne empire. Second, the Greek and Carthaginian colonies encountered and influenced the other Mediterranean societies: the Etruscans and Latins in Italy; the tribal Celts in southern Gaul and Spain; the Berbers, Numidians, and Egyptians in North Africa.

This colonial and cultural expansion widened the social horizons of the Greek world. No longer did the *polis* (city-state) claim the full attention and loyalty of the individual Greek thinker; Greeks in the late fourth century B.C. began to speak of the *oikumene,* the human world, as the natural community. The philosopher Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) urged Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, to extend his

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