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## ADVERSUS CALUMNIATORES MEDII AEVI. HOW THE MIDDLE AGES PAVED WAY FOR MODERN AGE\*

### Abstract

The popular opinion sees Middle Ages as a “bad” period holding that it was a time of regress in civilisation and was characterized by exaggerated interest in religious and theological issues leading to a neglect of all other aspects of human existence. The two claims are refuted with arguments taken from the history of civilisation and science, as well as from history of political doctrines and history of universities.

### Keywords:

medieval history, medieval philosophy, medieval science, medieval universities

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A medievalist’s work is never done. No matter how much effort is spent on explaining that the Middle Ages and Dark Ages are not synonyms, the slanderous opinion can hardly be eradicated. Therefore, I take this opportunity to present my evidence in favour of the period, assuming that it is worthwhile to provide arguments that may be useful for winning the hearts of the hesitant and offering some succour for those who are willing to defend the good name of this period. I will concentrate on disproving two claims which form the foundation of the popular opinion of Middle Ages as a “bad” period: 1) that it was a time of regress in civilisation, 2) that it was characterized by exaggerated interest in religious and theological issues leading to a lamentable neglect of all other aspects of human existence.

As for the first accusation, it is important to make some distinctions. Admittedly, it is difficult to oppose the thesis that the Middle Ages is an

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epoch of regress when its first period is called the Dark Ages even in academic texts.<sup>1</sup> Yet, such branding is guilty of an error that is especially irritating in our times of globalization, namely the error of myopia. In the past, when the Western perspective was simply accepted as the only, or at least the most important one, such concentration on what is closer to home could be excused. From that perspective, it is true that for more than four hundred years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West that part of Europe was mired in chaos brought by consecutive waves of invasions of Goths, Huns, Avars, and, after a relatively brief respite, of Norsemen and Magyars. As an old Latin saying has it: *inter arma silent musae*. I am not going to question this, still I do not think that the time was altogether wasted, and will return to the situation in the West by the end of my argument.

First, however, I would like to encourage you to take a broader look. To start with, the Empire was not gone altogether. Its eastern, Greek speaking part survived and continued its existence for the next eleven centuries, despite periods of internal strife and external invasions, first of Slavs and Arabs, later of Turks. The triumph of Christianity may have had some influence on discontinuing some aspects of pagan culture<sup>2</sup> (but should we really bemoan the end of gladiators' fights?), yet the dominant world view of those in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, even in the period of transition, was much more uniform than one would think, notwithstanding religious differences. This was because both Christianity and Paganism were under the overwhelming influence of the same philosophical school – the Neoplatonism.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the two sides were in conflict but this conflict was often solved through the force of argument and not just the argument of force. The most conspicuous examples can be seen in the fate of two most important centres of Ancient learning: the Academy of Athens and the *Mousaion* of Alexandria. Scholars of the conservative, in-

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<sup>1</sup> This term, first introduced by Petrarch in 1330s to name the period between Antiquity and his own times, was used again by Cesare Baronio in his *Annales Ecclesiastici* in 1602 to call the period of turmoil in 10th and 11th centuries. In the Age of Enlightenment it was extended to the whole period between Antiquity and the Renaissance by such writers as Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon (cf. Davies, 1996: 293–294).

<sup>2</sup> The blame for the black picture of Byzantium is often put on Edward Gibbon, whose *Decline and Fall of Roman Empire* (1994, V, 24) influenced the Western opinion for generations: “The subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonor the names of both Greeks and Romans, present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity, nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes.”

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the value of Plato's teaching was discovered by Christians before its renewal by Plotinus, already by Justin the Martyr (Chadwick, 1967: 163): “Justin also finds an allusion to the Christian Trinity in the cryptic sentence of the second Platonic epistle. [...] Justin's remark is the earliest evidence that this opaque utterance was being discussed in the Platonic schools in the century before Plotinus.”

ward looking Academy, faced with the edict of Emperor Justinian forbidding pagans to run institutions of learning, chose exile in Persia (D'Ancona, 2005: 18–20). In cosmopolitan Alexandria, pagans and Christians had long worked together in the *Mousaion* and it is a small wonder that they preferred “christening” the institution to its closure (D'Ancona, 2005: 15–18). This allowed it to continue its existence for another century or so and, thus, made it possible for the Arabs to take over a large part of the trove of Ancient learning after their conquest of Egypt (D'Ancona, 2005: 22–23). In the Byzantine Empire, which evolved out of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, learning had its ups and downs, more or less in tune with changes in other areas, both socially and geographically, but the Hellenic heritage was never forgotten and the interest in it was rekindled several times; paradoxically, from the Western perspective, the most important of them is the last one: the renaissance of the Palaeologues, a fantastic blossoming of the civilization mortally wounded by the Turkish invasions (cf. Kuksewicz, 1982: 151–160, 196–225). It is ironic that its fruit was collected and consumed by the West, first of all Italy, where it was brought by the exiles from Constantinople and triggered the spiritual revolution of the Renaissance (cf. Papiernik, 2012: 22–24).

Of no region is the claim that the end of the Roman rule brought also the end of civilization and learning less true than of the provinces which were conquered by the Arabs. The very same period, which in Western Europe is considered to be the rock bottom of cultural decline, was the time of most splendid development of Egypt, Syria, and Spain, but also of lands far beyond the Roman *limes* (cf. Mez, 1937: 170–179). The growth of the *Umma* meant that the achievements of learning at one of its ends quickly spread throughout the whole land, and beyond. When we bear in mind that this was an area extending from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and also deep into Central Asia, it is not difficult to imagine, but is nonetheless astounding, that this must have been the first truly global civilisation whose members could profit from the achievements of Greco-Roman, Persian, Indian and Chinese civilisations, ranging from things as tangible as various species of plants, which enriched the cuisine, to things as esoteric as theological ideas. A good example of this cultural fecundity of the early middle ages can be found in the history of alcohol, which was first distilled by the Greek scientists of Alexandria, later popularized as a medical substance by the Arabs (who also gave it its name), and finally applied to other uses in the West (cf. Forbes, 1970: 57 and 89). On a more sublime level, in the very same period, we can see scholars studying Indian mathematics or Aristotelian logic in Morocco<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa learnt mathematics during his commercial trips to Northern Africa (cf. Crombie, 1959: 34).

or in central Asia<sup>5</sup> (regions that were never before and hardly ever after associated with learning). It is lamentable that such a remarkable civilisation came to an abrupt end because of the Turkish and Mongol invasions and internal strife that followed them.<sup>6</sup> Again, the beneficiary was the Latin West, which soon enough realised that it had much to learn from the Arabs.<sup>7</sup> The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the great period of translations into Latin, not only from Greek but even more so from Arabic. This way, the Latin scholars managed to recover not only Aristotle, together with his great Greek and Arabic commentary tradition but also to acquire many treasures of late Ancient and early Medieval learning, including the works composed in the Alexandrian school.<sup>8</sup>

It is then that Westerners coined the phrase *translatio studii*, the transfer of learning, which like a Hegelian *Geist* first enlightened the Greeks, then the Arabs, before it finally landed on the North-Western shores of the Mediterranean Sea, whence it made its journey to Paris and Oxford.<sup>9</sup> Passing from one nation to another the knowledge was gradually enriched by each of them so that the younger generation could benefit from the achievements of the older. Realizing one's indebtedness to his or her predecessors is a trait of a noble mind and so it is small wonder that the saying: "We are dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants," reputedly

<sup>5</sup> "Kamal al-Din ibn Yunus of Mosul (d. 1242), the greatest Muslim teacher of his time, boasted of Christians among his pupils; one of Ibn Yunus' pupils, Siraj al-Din Urmawi, became a member of Frederick II Hohenstaufen's household and wrote a book on logic for him" (Burnett, 2005: 248).

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the destruction of wars, the decline of Arabic learning was stimulated by a shift of interest towards religion. Traditionally the blame is put on Al-Ghazali, who criticized secular knowledge in his *Incoherence of Philosophy*. In fact the driving force of this turning away from science was Abu Ali al-Hassan al-Tusi (1018–1092), better known as Nizam al-Mulk, the grand vizier of the Turkish Seljuq dynasty, who created a system of education known as "Nizamiyah" that focused on religious studies at the expense of independent inquiry (cf. Hassan, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> How important Arabic learning was for the Latins is demonstrated, for instance, by Adelard of Bath, a twelfth century philosopher and translator from that language. In his *Quaestiones naturales*, he puts in the mouth of his nephew a mock accusation of himself for the "shameless praise of the Arabs" (translated by Burnett, 1998: 87).

<sup>8</sup> The period of most intensive translation work, both from Greek and Arabic, was between the middle of the twelfth and the middle of the thirteenth century (cf. Dod, 1982, 46–53; Burnett, 2005, 371–384 and 391–400). A sequel to it was the translation of Plato and various Platonic texts in the second half of the fifteenth century (cf. Papiernik, 2012: 19–26).

<sup>9</sup> The concept was introduced by the twelfth century French writer Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote in his *Cligès*: "Through the books which we have, we know the deeds of the ancients and of times long passed. Our books have taught us that Greece had the first fame of chivalry and learning. Then came chivalry to Rome, and the sum of learning, which now is come to France" (Curtius, 1990: 385).

coined by Bernard of Chartres was later repeated by Isaac Newton, the father of modern physics.<sup>10</sup>

Before I move to the second argument, let me fulfil my promise of offering a few words concerning the early medieval West. Of course, it cannot be denied that the countries that can be called successor states of the Roman Empire suffered decline over a period of a few centuries. But just a glance at the map is enough to realize that what is now called the West extends far beyond the Roman *limes*. What about the countries on the other side? Ireland, Scotland, Scandinavia, Western Slavic countries – did they all suffer any decline? The question seems ridiculous. Of course, they did not, and for some of them, at least, the Middle Ages was a blooming period. A perfect example is Ireland. It adopted Christianity (together with many aspects of Greco-Roman culture) in the times of the worst turmoil in Western Europe and for some time it enjoyed the benefit of its position in the continent's peripheries, far away from wars and invasions. It became the library and, not long afterwards, the teachers' room of the West, when the Irish scholars, summoned by the rulers of the renovated empire, came to teach the Franks, the Alemans, and the Saxons, boldly carrying the torch of learning into the deep forests east of the Rhine and north of the Danube (cf. Le Goff, 2002: 101–102). A similar progress can be noticed in other countries of the said region. Considering Western Europe as a whole then, the thesis that the Middle Ages was a period of decline, which was the first point of the accusation, cannot be proven.<sup>11</sup>

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Time to turn to the second point of accusation. “But what do we owe to that period” – someone may protest – “except a bizarre obsession with the afterlife?”. Well, some of those benefits have already been mentioned. For those, who would object that they were merely taken over from others, my reply is this. It takes a strong civilisation to allow itself to be open for the other and to have the curiosity for what is new; this, according to Aristotle, is the starting point of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This youthful quality was what characterized the Greeks of the classical period and enabled them to learn from older peoples of Egypt and the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> We can see it also in

<sup>10</sup> Newton may have not known the original author of the famous phrase. Since the times of Bernard (ca. 1130), it was repeated by John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon* (1159) and then several times; Newton may have read it in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and repeated it in his letter to Robert Hooke in 1676 (Aerospacweb.org, 2004/2009).

<sup>11</sup> In her book on early medieval Europe, Maria Miśkiewicz devotes a whole chapter to “barbarians” contributions to civilisation (2008: 347–351).

<sup>12</sup> “It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize.” (Aristotle, 1995: II, 3348 [982b12–13]).

<sup>13</sup> Ancient Greeks' awareness that their knowledge was obtained from older peoples, such as Egyptians, is testified by various authors, for instance Plato (cf. 1997: 1296 [110A–D]).

the Latin West, in the translation schools of Castille and, to a lesser degree, Sicily. They brought us many things, both great and small.<sup>14</sup>

All right – the critic could say – but what about *original* achievements? Is it the only merit of the Middle Ages that it was able to collect and preserve the knowledge produced elsewhere and at some other time? Not really. I am not a historian of technology, so I am unable to state how much credit for innovation should go to medieval shipbuilders or mechanical clock makers,<sup>15</sup> just to name the two things that were of vital importance in the period of voyages of exploration that already started in the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> I would like to draw your attention to two phenomena belonging to the spiritual realm. They are so obvious for us that we scarcely notice that they have a history and, moreover, that their history starts in the Middle Ages. Neither was a deliberate invention but rather a result of numerous actions, which gradually shaped them before they emerged in the form that we can recognize. What I have in mind is the idea of university and the idea of separation of secular and ecclesiastical power. Both rest upon an important principle of autonomy, which is the foundation of so many institutions of the modern world and, indeed, the foundation of the modern concept of man.<sup>17</sup>

484 The idea of separation of secular and ecclesiastical powers is not proper to Christianity as such. Early Christian writers, such as St. Augustine, were happy to see the Roman Empire embrace Christianity as a state religion<sup>18</sup> and Christian writers, already since the times of Origen, saw it as a providential sign that the empire and Christianity started (roughly) at the same time.<sup>19</sup> The situation, in which a new creed was

<sup>14</sup> The translations comprised not only the *Corpus Aristotelicum* and related texts but a wide array of works in various disciplines (cf. Burnett, 2005: 371–384).

<sup>15</sup> In the thirteenth century, medieval shipbuilders developed vessels that could sail even against the wind and introduced more advanced technology of steering them. Roughly at the same time, medieval mechanics invented mechanical clocks measuring the time more accurately than earlier devices (cf. Miśkiewicz, 2008: 251).

<sup>16</sup> Voyages of exploration were started in the ninth century by the Vikings, who discovered and settled Iceland and penetrated Greenland and North America. Traditionally the name is given to the expeditions originated by Henry the Navigator of Portugal in the fifteenth century (cf. Davies, 1996: 294 and 452–453).

<sup>17</sup> Kant saw human autonomy as the fundament of the modern vision of the world (Panasiuk, 2021: 491–502).

<sup>18</sup> Augustine praises Christian emperors Constantine and Theodosius in *The City of God* (1913: V, 223–225).

<sup>19</sup> “Origen argued that Octavian Augustus *united in one kingdom many peoples* so that peace might rule on earth, which was necessary for Christ’s doctrine prohibiting *revenge even on the enemies* to triumph. This way, according to Origen, God used the reign of Augustus to create suitable conditions for spreading the gospel. By bringing internal order to the *Imperium Romanum* this ruler unwittingly prepared the empire for the coming of Christ

substituted for the old one as the state religion, was not particularly new either (it happened to Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and, of course, pagan Hellenistic-Roman religion before), so it is difficult to say that making the Church a part of state administration, as it happened in the Eastern Empire and was later transferred to the countries that took Christianity from Byzantium, is something specific either to the religion or the epoch.<sup>20</sup> However, the name *caesaro-papism*, attached to this idea by Westerners, does give us an interesting hint.<sup>21</sup> The name combines two concepts, of the emperor and pope, into one as if suggesting that it is an aggregate of two different natures. The understanding that the two natures stand for two different realms, which possess different and separate powers did not come easily. The history of fights for investiture in the West is a witness to it. Yet, the resulting idea that in a healthy state, there should be mutually checking institutions: the emperor, responsible for the secular branch, and the pope, responsible for the spiritual branch, which are autonomous in their actions, is a sufficient title for glory for the Middle Ages.<sup>22</sup> An interesting and valuable by-product of the idea of separation and autonomy of the spiritual and secular realms is the idea that a crime does not have to be a sin and vice versa, which was first expressed and argued for by Peter Abelard in his *Ethics* in the twelfth century (cf. Peter Abelard: 1995: 13–14). Already in his times, it gave rise to numerous arguments<sup>23</sup> which continued well into the modern era. We can conclude, therefore, against the thesis expressed in the second point of the accusation that the people who can see quite clearly the difference and autonomy of the secular and spiritual realms cannot be accused of obsession with religion.

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and thus facilitated the spreading of Christianity and played an important role in God's plan for the world. These opinions about the reign of Octavian Augustus were shared by Eusebius of Caesarea, the author of the first *Ecclesiastical History* and at the same time a close aide to the emperor Constantine the Great, his biographer and creator of a political-religious ideology based on Hellenistic, oriental, and Christian elements, which gave a new characteristic to the *Imperium Romanum*. He treated *pax Augusta* as the work of Divine Providence, foretold in the *Old Testament*" (Bralewski, 2018: 74–75).

<sup>20</sup> Rafał Marek discusses whether later Church Fathers adhered to the Hellenistic vision of the emperor and, especially, the interpretation of Gregory of Nazianzus's appeal to emperor Theodosius (2017: 7).

<sup>21</sup> "The term was coined in the early 18th century by Justus Henning Böhmer in his treatise on Protestant church law" (Marek, 2017: 1).

<sup>22</sup> The idea was championed by several authors, of whom the best known ones are two philosophers active in the first half of the fourteenth century: Marsilius of Padua with his *Defensor Pacis*, and William of Ockham with his *Opus nonaginta dierum* (cf. McGrade, 1982: 741–743).

<sup>23</sup> The fiercest attack on Abelard was by Bernard of Clairvaux, who was generally critical of independent scientific inquiry (cf. Minois, 1990: 193–195).

Universities are institutions that originated in the Middle Ages and are so much valued and cared for in the Western culture that in many states they are, apart from the Church sometimes, the oldest surviving institutions, older than the states themselves (e.g. in Italy, Germany or Poland<sup>24</sup>). Of course, there were institutions of learning even before universities, so it is not merely providing a suitable place where pupils meet their teachers that makes for the university's particular character. This can be found in their autonomy, which has several dimensions. The first one is the external or administrative autonomy. Even though medieval universities were ecclesiastical institutions, overseen by local bishops, who acted as their chancellors, they had their own authorities acting according to the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>25</sup> They had their own statutes, which functioned as their constitutions regulating all matters concerning programmes of teaching, regulations concerning exams and promotions, elections of university, faculty, and nation's officers, fees and other financial rules and so on.<sup>26</sup> Even for our standards, to say nothing of medieval ones, they were paragons of democracy and rule of law. But this was just the administrative framework. The second kind of autonomy was the autonomy of faculties within the university. The most popular, so-called Parisian type of the university, had four faculties: Liberal Arts, which was a preparatory faculty, and three higher faculties of medicine, law, and theology, enrolling at which usually required a degree in the Arts. Each of those faculties had its own subjects and methods of academic work and was, nominally at least, independent in its research.<sup>27</sup> This stood in contrast to earlier

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<sup>24</sup> Naturally, this comment refers to those states as modern political entities, which started their political existence only in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, respectively. The same is true even of much older states: Oxford University is older than the United Kingdom and Salamanca University is older than Spain.

<sup>25</sup> The vestige of this arrangement can be seen, for instance, in the institutional organization of Catholic University of Lublin, which has the Great Chancellor (Wielki Kanclerz), in the person of the archbishop of Lublin, the elected rector and senate, and elected heads of faculties and departments. Cf. *Statut Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II*, 2006 (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, 2020, I, § 3, no. 3, III and IV).

<sup>26</sup> The earliest surviving statute is that of the University of Paris, issued by the papal legate Robert de Courçon in 1215 (cf. Krauze-Błachowicz, 2002: XXII–XXIII).

<sup>27</sup> The autonomy of philosophical studies was championed not only by philosophers, such as Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia (cf. Krauze-Błachowicz, 2002: XXXVI–XXXVII), but also by theologians, for instance by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa contra gentiles*: “Human philosophy considers creatures as they are in themselves: hence we find different divisions of philosophy according to the different classes of things. But Christian faith considers them, not in themselves, but inasmuch as they represent the majesty of God, and in one way or another are directed to God. [...] Therefore the philosopher and the faithful Christian (*fidelis*) consider different points about creatures: the philosopher considers what

schools, which proclaimed a mode of learning in which other disciplines were subordinate to theology, as stated by Hugh of St. Victor in *Didacalicon* (1939: 1–47) and reiterated by St. Bonaventure in his *De reductione artium ad theologiam* (1891: V, 319–325). The final autonomy, that of a scholar himself, was, of course, strictly circumscribed, but sufficiently broad to give him a possibility to engage in research subjects of his own choice and to pursue theories he himself found to be most attractive. Opinions could be promoted and challenged at will. Censure existed, of course, but not censorship (this is the invention of later times).<sup>28</sup> In some respects, medieval scholars had more freedom of research than their modern successors. Needless to say, the faculty with greatest freedom of research was that of Liberal Arts or Philosophy. In juxtaposition with the argument of accusation concerning obsession with religious issues, it seems a bit humorous that its members were sometimes prohibited to engage in arguments of theological character.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, I think that I have sufficiently proven, through arguments with no pretence to completeness, that the two theses invoked against the Middle Ages are baseless and, moreover, that the Middle Ages have given their fair share to the ideas and institutions that make up the Modern Times.

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attaches to them in their proper nature: the faithful Christian considers about creatures only what attaches to them in their relation to God, as that they are created by God, subject to God, and the like" (translated by Rickaby, 2005: II, ch. 4, 145).

<sup>28</sup> The idea of censorship is directly linked to the invention of print by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450, which was still in the Middle Ages. The first attempts at censorship came some 25 years later. It is only in 1501, however, that pope Alexander VI issued a constitution that was a fundament of systematic censorship, later perfected in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* (cf. Minois, 1990: 317).

<sup>29</sup> These prohibitions had the form of condemnations of certain theses that were meant to stop inquiry into theological issues by philosophers. A good example is the *Syllabus* of Etienne Tempier, the bishop of Paris, issued in 1277, and aimed chiefly at Latin Averroist masters from the Faculty of Arts, who engaged in discussions entering the theological realm (cf. Serńko, 2002: 296–298).

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