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Why Should we Care about the Middle Ages? Putting the Case for the Relevance of Studying Medieval Europe

Abstract: This introductory chapter puts forward a case for the continuing importance of studying the European Middle Ages. The early twenty-first century is witness to a boom in popular interest in the medieval, one which is playing a significant role in shaping both politics and popular culture. Paradoxically, while this boom has led to increasing study of ‘medievalism’, investment in the disciplines that involve the study of the Middle Ages themselves is in relative decline with questions frequently raised about the value of such research. This chapter begins by examining the challenges that necessitate a defence of research whose key focus is the period between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries. It goes on to consider the nature of the relationship that has developed between Modernity and the Middle Ages and reflects on the changing role that medieval scholars have played in society since History emerged as a professional discipline in the nineteenth century. It poses the important question of what a focus on the medieval might offer contemporary society, arguing that a significant distinction should be drawn between ‘usefulness’ and ‘relevance’. It contends that not only does the medieval remain relevant but that that relevance is to be found in surprising, frequently overlooked, areas that range from advancing modern medical knowledge and assessing the impact of climate change to informing contemporary political and social discourse.

Keywords: Medieval Studies, historiography, medievalism, History and Society, popular history, ideology, contemporary and modern nationalisms

There is a growing ambivalence concerning the relationship between modern (western) societies and the medieval world from which they sprang. The experience of the first decades of the twenty-first century suggests that attempts at critical reflection on the state of the study of Europe’s Middle Ages, and on the relationship between the medieval period and contemporary society in particular, often involve paradoxes,

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contradictions, and ideological conflicts.¹ This is, in part, the result of an abuse of the period by those intent on fabricating a mythical ‘golden age’ to justify abhorrent, racist ideologies. Tragically, on 15 March 2019, a horrifying example of such abuse was evident in connection with the massacre of fifty-one people attending Friday prayers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand: the alleged perpetrator made use of a cycle of medieval images that white supremacists have sought to associate with their repugnant ideology. This dialectic, however, is also a consequence of the way in which the period between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries has proved a fecund source for shaping wider popular culture. The influence of images, concepts, and ideas that are – correctly or wrongly – identified with ‘the Middle Ages’ can, for example, be felt in the pseudo-medieval, pseudo-Shakespearian world constructed by Kenneth BRANAGH for Marvel Studio’s ‘Thor’ (2011). It informs the re-imagining of Aotearoa New Zealand as J. R. R. TOLKIEN’s Middle Earth (2001–2014) by Peter JACKSON. And it strongly marks the dark fantasy that is both George R. R. MARTIN’s novels and their adaptation by HBO as ‘Game of Thrones’ (2011–).² Without doubt, these latter are less reprehensible than the twisting of history to create a sense of identity for neo-Nazi groups. But even if these creations are clearly fictional, they have the power to convey images and ideas that shape the attitudes and beliefs of their audiences in the ‘real’ world.

In recent years, there has been a marked shift in scholarship to focus on popular culture’s increasing embrace of the Middle Ages. The trend is termed, by academics at

1 See, for example, Peter RAEDTS, *Die Entdeckung des Mittelalters. Geschichte einer Illusion*, Darmstadt 2016 (Dutch orig. 2011); Tommaso DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, *Medioevo militante. La politica di oggi alle prese con barbari e crociati*, Turin 2011 (English translation in preparation; we refer to the French translation: *Médiéval et militant. Penser le contemporain à travers le Moyen Âge*, transl. Michèle GRÉVIN, Paris 2015); Valentin GROEBNER, *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf. Über historisches Erzählen*, Munich 2008; Jacques LE GOFF, *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?*, Paris 2014; K. Patrick FAZIOLI, *The Mirror of the Medieval: An Anthropology of the Western Historical Imagination*, New York 2017. Inspiring older contributions include: Peter VON MOOS, *Gefahren des Mittelalterbegriffs. Diagnostische und präventive Aspekte*, in: Joachim HEINZLE (ed.), *Modernes Mittelalter. Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, Frankfurt, Leipzig 1994, pp. 33–63.

2 For a detailed study of the latter: Carolyne LARRINGTON, *Winter is Coming. The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*, London, New York 2015 (German transl. by Jörg FÜNDLING, Stuttgart 2016); Zita ROHR / Lisa BENZ (eds.), *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*, Cham 2019 (forthcoming). For a more general perspective see Andrew B. R. ELLIOTT, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media. Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century (Medievalism 10)*, Cambridge 2017. Further studies on constructions of the Middle Ages in popular culture can be found in Tobias ENSELEIT / Christian PETERS (eds.), *Bilder vom Mittelalter. Vorstellungen von einer vergangenen Epoche und ihre Inszenierung in modernen Medien (Wissenschaftliche Schriften der WWU Münster. Reihe X, 26)*, Münster 2017. William BLANC, *Winter is Coming. Une brève histoire politique de la fantasy*, Montreuil 2019, proposes an interpretation of medievalisms in fantastic literature that underlines the intimate relation with the respective political and social environment and its preoccupations.

least, ‘medievalism’.³ While the study of medievalism and the social phenomenon that it represents is laudable, this collection of essays springs from a different interest. Its focus is the continuing social and wider value of research into the Middle Ages themselves, that is the literary, historical, archaeological, and other scholarship that we will group here under the label ‘Medieval Studies’.

This volume has a simple objective: to demonstrate why expertise in the field of the Middle Ages remains important to contemporary society. The case is worth making, in part, because there is a real danger that a popular enthusiasm for medievalism may obscure the distinction between the ‘real’ Middle Ages and modern fantasy, whether the latter is considered dangerous or merely diverting. The potential problem is compounded by the internet, which, while laudably enabling an unprecedented democratization of access to knowledge (in spite of all the barriers that continue to exist), has also removed much of the traditional quality assurance performed by publishers via the process of academic peer review. Professional scholars, and not just those of the Middle Ages, find themselves in increasing danger of being marginalized as irrelevant in a world where few among the wider public see any issue with the primary point of access for an understanding of the past being Wikipedia.⁴

An important issue that arises from the removal of traditional ‘gatekeepers’ to knowledge is that the line between ‘opinion’ and ‘fact’ may become increasingly blurred. So much so, indeed, that Kellyanne CONWAY, then Counsellor to the US President, once – laughably – could claim that she possessed “alternative facts” in the face of convincing evidence concerning the numbers attending Donald TRUMP’s

3 For the growing importance of medievalism, see Richard UTZ, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Past Imperfect), Kalamazoo 2017; Louis D’ARCELS (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Cambridge 2016; Elizabeth EMERY / Richard UTZ (eds.), *Medievalism. Key Critical Terms*, Cambridge 2014, and Bettina BILDHAUER / Chris JONES (eds.), *The Middle Ages in the Modern World*, Oxford 2017. Please note, the Chris JONES who edited the latter is not to be conflated with the editor of this volume. For reflections on more political phenomena, see the important collection of articles in János BAK / Jörg JARNUT / Pierre MONNET / Bernd SCHNEIDMÜLLER (eds.), *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters, 19.–21. Jahrhundert / Uses and Abuses of the Middle Ages: 19th–21st Century / Usages et Mésusages du Moyen Âge du XIX^e au XXI^e siècle* (MittelalterStudien des Instituts zur Interdisziplinären Erforschung des Mittelalters und seines Nachwirkens, Paderborn 17), Munich 2009.

4 For some discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of Wikipedia with regard to history: Roy ROSENZWEIG, *Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past*, in: *Journal of American History* 93(1) (2006), pp. 117–146; republished online: <https://rrchnm.org/essay/can-history-be-open-source-wikipedia-and-the-future-of-the-past/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). See also Maren LORENZ, *Geschichtsdarstellung und Geschichtsverhandlung in Wikipedia oder: Die Sehnsucht nach Beständigkeit im Unbeständigen*, in: Barbara KORTE / Sylvia PALETSCHEK (eds.), *History goes Pop. Zur Repräsentation von Geschichte in populären Medien und Genres*, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 289–312, and EAD., *Wikipedia – ein Modell für die Zukunft? Zur Gefahr des Verschwindens der Grenzen zwischen Information und Infotainment*, in: Marco JORIO / Cindy EGGS (eds.), *“Am Anfang ist das Wort.” Lexika in der Schweiz*, Baden / CH 2008, pp. 91–109.

inauguration as President of the United States.⁵ Europe's Middle Ages are actually a long-suffering victim of an ideological agenda that can confuse oft-stated opinion with reality. The trend began with the 'reporting' of the period by Renaissance scholars, who first applied the label 'the Dark Ages' to the centuries that preceded them. As Peter BURKE once noted, a key error of the nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jacob BURCKHARDT, whose legacy still shapes our conception of the Renaissance and its significance, was to accept these scholars and artists "at their own valuation".⁶ Today, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that we live in a period of growing populism in which politicians, when confronted with unpalatable facts, have a tendency to denigrate the source of those facts by arguing that the public "have had enough of experts".⁷ In such a world, scholars face the danger of being reduced to the role of mere entertainers who, when challenging popular opinion, are considered to offer little more than their own "alternative facts", facts from which the public is entitled to pick and choose as it sees fit.

The above state of affairs makes it necessary to begin by underlining that while the practitioners of Medieval Studies certainly do not lack their own opinions, what constitutes them as members of a professional discipline is that their conclusions, whatever they may be, are based on informed analysis and are subject to rigorous peer review. Western society has reached a crossroads at which it needs to reflect with care on this important distinction. Do we really wish to set the assessments of trained Egyptologists alongside the pronouncements of the YouTuber who declares that the pyramids were built by aliens? Or to entertain the views of those who continue to argue that the Earth is flat, a position ably disproved by, amongst many, Conrad of Megenberg? Conrad even supplied an illustrated proof of the planet's curvature in his mid-fourteenth century 'Deutsche Sphaera'!⁸ To take an apocryphal example, should

⁵ The phrase was first used by CONWAY in an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" (22 January 2017), online: <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

⁶ Peter BURKE, *The Renaissance*, New York 1997, pp. 2–3 (quote: p. 3). For a sample of Renaissance 'spin' in translation: Loys LE ROY, *The Excellence of this Age* (1575), in: James B. ROSS / Mary M. McLAUGHLIN (eds.), *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, New York 1953, pp. 91–108.

⁷ This particular statement was made by the then British Justice Secretary, Michael GOVE, MP during the BREXIT debate when he was asked to name an economist who supported Britain's exit from the European Union. Henry MANCE, *Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove*, in: *The Financial Times* (3 June 2016), online: <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> (15/05/2019). The problem is not limited to the situation in the UK, as witnessed by publications such as Marc E. FITCH, *Shmexperts. How Ideology and Power Politics are Disguised as Science*, Washington / DC 2015; see also the chapter by Klaus OSHEMA in this volume.

⁸ For a recent example concerning the pyramids: Jon AUSTIN, *Time Travel Shock: Speed of light is 'final proof aliens built pyramids' claims researcher* in: *The Express online* (2 April 2018), online: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/940347/Time-travel-speed-of-light-prof-aliens-built-pyramids-UFO> (last accessed 15/05/2019). For a (sceptical) overview of key sites often associated with alleged alien architects: Nadia DRAKE, *7 Ancient Sites Some People Think Were Built by Aliens*, in: *National*

we accord equal weight to the pronouncements of the oft-anonymous blogger who, having taken a sentence out of its original context, reads it in a poor translation, and subsequently ‘reveals’ a conspiracy that has been concealed for centuries?⁹ While the freedom to hold an opinion is a praiseworthy feature of western society, by the same token, it is worth recognizing that not every opinion is an informed one. Or, to put it more simply, in the company of CONWAY’s interviewer, Chuck TODD, the editors of this volume do not consider “alternative facts” to be facts at all.

Yet, in making an argument for the continuing importance of expertise in Medieval Studies and for the value of studying the ‘real’ Middle Ages, the editors have no appetite to join the ranks of hapless populist politicians. This volume will not, for example, assert that essential aspects of modern, twenty-first century living, such as the internet, owe their origin to the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Nor, at the opposite end of the spectrum, will it put the hackneyed argument that the medieval is worth studying simply for its own sake. Make no mistake, we believe that it is. We also recognize that such an argument is unlikely to convince tax payers who, understandably, wonder why they should contribute towards supporting the Humanities as a whole. What, the public might – and should – ask, do the historians do for us? ‘Art for art’s sake’ is an argument only ever likely to convince three groups: an elite who take pleasure in patronage; a fragment of the political establishment who believe in patronizing everyone else with their view of what constitutes ‘Culture’; and, of course, practitioners of the Humanities. Our intention is to put a different case based on ‘relevance’.¹¹ It is a case inspired by a particular concern: that there is a possibility that an understanding of the

Geographic (26 October 2017), online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/travel-interests/arts-and-culture/ancient-sites-built-by-aliens/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). For the continuing popularity of the hilarious – albeit disturbing – view that the Earth is flat: 2018 Flat Earth International Conference, online: <https://fe2018.com/about/about-us/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). For the medieval understanding of the Earth’s spherical shape: Rudolf SIMEK, *Heaven and Earth in the Middle Ages: The Physical World before Columbus*, transl. Angela HALL, Woodbridge 1996 (German orig. 1992), pp. 24–38, and for Conrad’s proof specifically, p. 32. On the creation of the myth of the “flat earth” see also Jeffrey Burton RUSSEL, *Inventing the Flat Earth. Columbus and Modern Historians*, Westport / CT, London 1991, and Louise M. BISHOP, *The Myth of the Flat Earth*, in: Stephen J. HARRIS / Bryon L. GRIGSBY (eds.), *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages* (Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture 7), New York, London 2008, pp. 97–101.

9 For a series of essays that debunk widespread popular myths about the Middle Ages, see HARRIS / GRIGSBY (note 8).

10 One example of such populism is the claim in April 2018 by Biplab DEB, chief minister of the north-eastern Indian state of Tripura, that the internet was a product of ancient Indian civilization. He cited the ancient Hindu epic ‘Mahabharata’ as proof and was, rightly, much ridiculed: Minister ridiculed for saying ancient India invented internet, in: BBC News (18 April 2018), online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43806078> (15/05/2019).

11 It is worth noting that one peer reviewer of this introduction expressed his / her disgust at this approach. The discipline, they stated, justified itself through its own scientific results, no more, no less; there was no reason to consider its ‘relevance’ beyond that. While we appreciate the

‘real’ Middle Ages may be lost as a result of the enthusiasm with which the medieval has been embraced as a source for the fantastical. Without wishing to argue in favour of a new positivism, this volume will therefore look at some of the broader social and scientific benefits to implementing Leopold VON RANKE’s famous, if now somewhat clichéd, dictum that the historian’s task is to explore “how things actually were” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).¹²

Is studying the Middle Ages in Europe – and increasingly beyond¹³ – relevant in the twenty-first century? We believe that not only does the medieval remain relevant but that its relevance is to be found in some surprising places. In this volume, which, of course, represents only a sample of the possible approaches, we have selected what we consider to be a series of powerful case studies that demonstrate the way in which Medieval Studies can contribute solutions to urgent challenges. These challenges include two of the greatest faced by our species: the threat posed by anti-microbial resistance to drug treatments and the impact of climate change. At the same time, the volume contains chapters intended to contribute to informing contemporary political and social discourse.

argument, we consider adopting such a perspective to be blinkered. We hold that we live and work in specific social contexts and that we have a duty to the societies we are a part of (and that enable us to do our work) to reach out and explain the worth of our scientific endeavour. And there is also an element of self-interest here for failure to do so might very well result in the – perhaps even justified – suppression of our (worthwhile) specializations. We cannot help but feel that an inability or unwillingness to recognize this is more than a little naïve.

12 The famous dictum is to be found in the preface to Leopold VON RANKE, *Geschichte der lateinischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, Leipzig 1885, p. vii. For discussion of the philosophy of history it embodies and its relationship with positivism: Michael BENTLEY, *Modern Historiography. An Introduction*, London 1999, pp. 36–42.

13 By employing the expression ‘the Middle Ages’ as a convenient shorthand for the period between the fifth and the fifteenth century, we do not intend to imply that we subscribe to arguments that researchers should refrain from developing a globalized perspective. For the most recent expression of such views: Thomas BAUER, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient*, Munich 2018. We consider such arguments to be based on an erroneously ‘realistic’ understanding of the ontological status of historical periods. In our view, an overwhelming number of contributions with a ‘global’ focus demonstrate the value of adopting a wider perspective. See, for example, SOCIÉTÉ DES HISTORIENS MÉDIÉVISTES DE L’ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR PUBLIC (ed.), *Histoire monde, jeux d’échelles et espaces connectés* (Publications de la Sorbonne. Série Histoire ancienne et médiévale 151), Paris 2017 (with further bibliographical references). For a more theoretical argument against the use of the term ‘Middle Ages’ see Bernhard JUSSEN, *Richtig denken im falschen Rahmen? Warum das ‘Mittelalter’ nicht in den Lehrplan gehört*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 67(9–10) (2016), pp. 558–576, and ID., *Wer falsch spricht, denkt falsch: Warum Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit in die Wissenschaftsgeschichte gehören*, in: *Spekulative Theorien, Kontroversen, Paradigmenwechsel: Streitgespräch in der Wissenschaftlichen Sitzung der Versammlung der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften am 25. November 2016* (BBAW Schriftenreihe 17), Berlin 2017, pp. 38–52.

We begin, however, by considering the circumstances that have engendered an increasing degree of self-reflection amongst scholars of Medieval Studies: the paradoxical relationship between Modernity and the Middle Ages and the rise and fall of the ‘useful’ medievalist in western society. We will subsequently explore the important distinction that should be drawn between the ‘usefulness’ and ‘relevance’ of Medieval Studies, in the process establishing why trained medieval scholars remain a genuinely valuable asset to the societies of which they are a part.

Modernity & the Middle Ages: The Conflicted Relationship

The late German historian Otto G. OEXLE (d. 2016) repeatedly analysed the relationship between medieval cultures, their legacies, and contemporary society. He described the resulting image of the medieval period as “*entzweites Mittelalter*”, a nearly untranslatable notion that might approximate as the “disunited Middle Ages”. In doing so, he was alluding to an almost schizophrenic underlying principle.¹⁴ According to OEXLE, the very essence of Modernity is defined by its ambivalent relationship with the Middle Ages. The latter serve as a necessary and indispensable negative foil for the positive self-assessment of ‘modern culture’: they were a dark and brutal period in which everything positive that characterizes the progressive developments that allow us to live in the bright age of Modernity had yet to come into existence. Seen from this perspective, the Middle Ages were a (regrettably) uncivilized period that we had to overcome. Today, according to the Panglossian modernist, this task is accomplished.

Celebrating Modernity via a complacent comparison with the medieval period is, of course, by no means simple and straightforward, especially since people living in western societies have felt, since the dawn of Modernity, that something has been lost along the way. Modern life is replete with negative experiences that can easily make people feel alienated.¹⁵ It is hard, for instance, to find the answers to quite fundamental questions: ‘What’s it all for?’, ‘Where do we come from?’, and ‘Where are we going?’. As a consequence, there have always been those, from the eighteenth-century Romantics to the present day, who looked back to earlier periods with a

¹⁴ Otto G. OEXLE, *Das entzweite Mittelalter*, in: Gerd ALTHOFF (ed.), *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter. Themen und Funktionen moderner Geschichtsbilder vom Mittelalter* (Ausblicke. Essays und Analysen zu Geschichte und Politik), Darmstadt 1992, pp. 7–28 and 168–177; Id., *Die Moderne und ihr Mittelalter. Eine folgenreiche Problemgeschichte*, in: Peter SEGL (ed.), *Mittelalter und Moderne. Entdeckung und Rekonstruktion der mittelalterlichen Welt. Kongreßakten des 6. Symposiums des Mediävistenverbandes in Bayreuth 1995*, Sigmaringen 1997, pp. 307–364; Id., *Die Gegenwart des Mittelalters* (Das mittelalterliche Jahrtausend 1), Berlin 2013.

¹⁵ See, for example, Anthony GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge 1990.

feeling of loss and nostalgia: was the world of our forefathers not wonderfully simple and meaningful in comparison to our own?

In the end, it does not really matter which of the two modes of relating to the Middle Ages the individual prefers.¹⁶ Both are inextricably linked to the development of Modernity: having a sense of what it means to live in the Modern era requires a sense of what it means to live in the medieval era.

For medievalists, however, OEXLE's analysis could not be more attractive, since its implications offer an indisputable justification for research into the distant period that we label 'medieval'. While it might be suggested such knowledge is nice to have, it would be easy to argue that medieval scholarship is not indispensable for us to function in the present day. It is, of course, interesting to know, for example, that modern glasses, pizza, or the fork constitute medieval inventions, yet it seems hardly necessary to know about these distant origins in order to produce excellent glasses or pizza.¹⁷ According to OEXLE's argument, understanding this period provides us with far more than just knowledge about the emergence of our modern societies, rather, the Middle Ages are indelibly imprinted into Modernity's 'genes', which means that knowledge of the medieval is of immediate consequence for our understanding of our own contemporary societies.

Thus far OEXLE. But we believe matters to be even more complicated than the above sketch would suggest. The presence and effects of medieval objects and motifs in the modern world cannot be neatly categorized: in fact, the more one reflects on the situation of Medieval Studies and medievalism in contemporary societies, the more one realises the enormous multiplicity of situations, contexts, and meanings that need to be taken into account. As was noted above, the early twenty-first century is witness to an overwhelming interest in things medieval in popular culture.¹⁸ Some of the products that witness this success are intimately connected with Medieval Studies, even though their aim is, principally, popularization. One notable

¹⁶ The situation is, of course, far more complex than this simplified distinction of two modes might imply: While the position towards the Middle Ages was rapidly used as an argument, for example, in the debates between Catholics (who tended to underline tradition and continuity) and Protestants (who preferred to reach back to early Christianity, perceiving the Middle Ages as a period of decadence and decline) – see Coen MAAS, *Medievalism and Political Rhetoric in Humanist Historiography from the Low Countries (1515–1609)* (Proteus 7), Turnhout 2018, pp. 35–36 – there is no entirely clear-cut distinction along these major ideological fault-lines, see the examples given in RAEDTS (note 1), pp. 54–60. An analogous case can be made for the widespread preconception that only conservative or even nationalist political positions tend to use references to the Middle Ages: AS DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI (note 1), pp. 111–128, demonstrates, the period between the 1960s and 1980s in particular witnessed the creation of the image of an 'anarchic' (and thus politically left-leaning) Middle Ages.

¹⁷ See the wonderfully narrated account by Chiara FRUGONI, *Books, Banks, Buttons, and Other Inventions from the Middle Ages*, transl. William McCUAIG, New York 2003 (Ital. orig. 2001).

¹⁸ See above, note 2.

example is exhibitions on medieval topics, which have had an astonishing success in the course of the last two decades.¹⁹ Others are more loosely linked to academia: one might think of leisure activities ranging from re-enactment and living-history movements to medieval markets.²⁰ And the list goes on.

Contemporary political discourse is marked by a similar interest in the medieval. With the (re-)awakening of nationalistic political movements after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-organization of the political landscape of Eastern Europe and beyond, allusions to historical events and medieval developments have become increasingly prominent.²¹ The Middle Ages are considered the alleged ‘cradle’ of many nation-states.²² Absurd as their practices might seem, one can hardly ignore the fact that movements like the so-called ‘Alt-Right’ in the United States and beyond use symbolism mis-appropriated from the medieval to create and claim a (racist) identity and to pursue identity politics.²³

Eighteen of the many terms scrawled in white writing on the body armour and weapons of the alleged perpetrator of the March 2019 New Zealand mosque attacks were references to medieval figures and events, prominent among them being

19 On German exhibitions since the late 1990s, Simone HEIMANN, *Das Mittelalter endet gestern. Überlegungen zum Mittelalter in Sonderausstellungen*, in: Sascha BÜTOW / Peter RIEDEL / Uwe TRESP (eds.), *Das Mittelalter endet gestern. Beiträge zur Landes-, Kultur- und Ordensgeschichte*. Heinz-Dieter Heimann zum 65. Geburtstag (Studien zur brandenburgischen und vergleichenden Landesgeschichte 16), Berlin 2014, pp. 366–373. One British example is the 2015 exhibition “Magna Carta: Law, Liberty, Legacy”, which was described as “the most successful paid exhibition the [British] Library has ever staged, attracting 126,283 visitors (against a target of 80,000)”, see British Library Annual Report and Accounts 2015/16, London 2016, p. 21, online: <https://www.bl.uk/about-us/annrep/2015to2016/annual-report2015-16.pdf> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

20 For one prominent example of the former, see the “Society for Creative Anachronism”, whose website claims “over 30,000 members residing in countries around the world”, online: <http://www.sca.org/> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

21 BAK et al. (note 3); see also Patrick GEARY, *Writing the Nation: Historians and National Identities from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries*, in: BILDHAUER / JONES (note 3), pp. 73–86, and the essays in Len SCALES / Oliver ZIMMER (eds.), *Power and the Nation in European History*, Cambridge 2005. For a critical reaction to the recent revival of nostalgic and uncritically affirmative presentations of national history in France, see William BLANC / Aurore CHÉRY / Christophe NAUDIN, *Les historiens de garde*, 2nd ed. Paris 2016 (the 3rd ed. was published while this chapter was in press).

22 This has, of course, also to do with the establishment of Historical Studies, and particularly Medieval History, as an academic discipline in the 19th century, see below, note 49.

23 Kimberly A. KLIMEK’s paper “At the Front of the Storm: Teaching the Multicultural Middle Ages in the Age of the alt-Right”, delivered at the joint 2018 Medieval Association of the Pacific / Rocky Mountain Medieval & Renaissance Association (MAP-RMMRA) conference held in Las Vegas offers the latest research on the misappropriation of medieval symbolism by right-wing groups during the 2017 clashes in Charlottesville, Virginia. More generally, see: Daniel WOLLENBERG, *Medieval Imagery in Today’s Politics (Past Imperfect)*, Leeds 2018.

Charles Martel and also the crusades.²⁴ By intertwining references to Hitler and twentieth-century fascism with medieval warriors, a white supremacist agenda is tied to a narrative where horrific deeds are intended to appear heroic and part of an (entirely invented) tradition of a racial and religious war stretching back centuries, rather than a foul and unspeakably brutal slaughter of unarmed people. Clearly, these medieval references are acquiring a potency of meaning in our times, even if the potency is derived entirely from contemporary concerns rather than any justifiable legacy of their historical medieval creation.

It quickly becomes clear that medieval names and symbols are used not only to propagate racist positions, but also that their use in this context is just absurd to the professional scholar.²⁵ Perhaps one of the oddest cases is the erroneous transformation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* into a translation (allegedly from a Scandinavian original) and, more bizarre still, its adoption as a ‘sacred’ text by right-wing followers of Odinism.²⁶ As a consequence, medievalists find themselves frequently torn between their desire, as citizens, to engage in public discourse – and debunk this sort of fatuous nonsense – and the need to focus on the academic activities that will both maintain their scholarly reputations and meet the standards of an academic profession increasingly dominated by – slightly surreal – metrics.²⁷ The

24 Gillian BROCKELL, The accused New Zealand shooter and an all-white Europe that never existed, in: Washington Post (16 March 2019), online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/03/16/accused-new-zealand-shooter-an-all-white-europe-that-never-existed/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). Please note this article contains still images taken from the alleged gunman’s self-shot live stream. The Chief Censor of the New Zealand Office of Film and Literature Classification has deemed footage from this film and the alleged perpetrator’s manifesto, “The Great Replacement”, objectionable publications and banned possession, reading, or viewing of them in Aotearoa New Zealand. While it is possible to apply for an exemption to read the manifesto on grounds of legitimate academic research, permission to view the document had not yet been received at the time of writing. It was therefore illegal for the New Zealand-based author to view it. Its content is therefore not considered here.

25 On the immediate aftermath of the events at Charlottesville in August 2017, see, for example, the blog entries by Paul B. STURTEVANT, Leaving “Medieval” Charlottesville. Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages, in: The Public Medievalist (17 August 2017), online: <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/leaving-medieval-charlottesville/> (last accessed 15/05/2019), and Mark BRUCE, The Alt-Right is Hijacking the Middle Ages: Medievalists Aren’t Going to Let Them, in: surfingedges (18 August 2017), online: <https://surfingedges.com/2017/08/18/the-alt-right-is-hijacking-the-middle-ages-medievalists-arent-going-to-let-them> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

26 This topic was discussed as part of Donald BURKE’s paper “That’s Not the Story I Remember: The Adoption and Interpretation of Beowulf by Far-Right Racist Groups”, delivered at the 2018 MAP-RMMRA conference (see note 23).

27 For this characteristic tension see, for example, Celia CHAZELLE / Simon DOUBLEDAY / Felice LIFSHITZ / Amy G. REMENSNYDER, Introduction, in: ID. (eds.), *Why the Middle Ages Matter. Medieval Light on Modern Injustice*, Abingdon, New York 2012, pp. 1–14, esp. pp. 5–6. The classic description of this particular tension was, of course, furnished by Max WEBER, *Wissenschaft als Beruf, 1917 / 1919. Politik als Beruf, 1919*, ed. Wolfgang J. MOMMSEN / Wolfgang SCHUCHTER / Birgitt MORGENBROD,

importance of public engagement is, however, highlighted by the furore that has engulfed Christchurch's rugby team since the March mosque attacks. Since its establishment as part of New Zealand's Super Rugby League in 1996, the team has been known as *The Crusaders*. At the time of writing, no decision had yet been made concerning the future of the name but the boards of both New Zealand Rugby and the team itself had already begun a process to examine the appropriateness of retaining it. Reflecting on the nature of the religious wars with which the term was inextricably associated, the team had already decided to abandon permanently their traditional pre-game entertainment, which had included knights on horseback wearing crosses and wielding swords.²⁸ The issue of a name change has, however, proved extremely contentious in New Zealand society. While many, including the authors, consider the original decision to adopt the name to be, to say the least, naïve, there have been those keen to defend its retention.²⁹

The above might lead to the impression that at least the 'popular' Middle Ages are very much 'alive and kicking', a development that would probably have surprised any critical observer between the mid-twentieth century and the 1980s.³⁰ Paradoxically, in spite of the period's evident popularity, funding for academic research on medieval subjects remains under permanent threat. While positions in Medieval History seem relatively stable, other related disciplines are suffering enormously from this trend. This is especially true of Philology and Linguistics, but also of Art History, Literature, and other disciplines, which traditionally reserved an important place for the Middle Ages.³¹ All are under constant pressure to focus more and more on the modern aspects of their objects of study. And today, as the historian Valentin GROEBNER described so

Tübingen 1994, who focussed on a clear distinction between the production of knowledge / truth and values / opinion.

28 Mat KERMEEN, Super Rugby: Seeking Muslim feedback on Crusaders name 'not fair' so soon after terror attacks, in: Stuff (3 April 2019), online: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/super-rugby/111750672/super-rugby-crusaders-and-nzr-engage-research-company-on-branding-dilemma?rm=a> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

29 For some of the varying views expressed in the New Zealand media, see Kevin NORQUAY, Super Rugby: The time for the Crusaders to put their name to the sword has arrived, in: Stuff (4 April 2019), online: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/opinion/111790180/super-rugby-the-time-for-the-crusaders-to-put-their-name-to-the-sword-has-arrived?rm=m> (last accessed 15/05/2019), and Duncan GARNER, Crusaders should hold the line, and keep their name, in: Stuff (5 April 2019), online: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/super-rugby/111832155/crusaders-should-hold-the-line-and-keep-their-name> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

30 Hence František GRAUS, *Lebendige Vergangenheit. Überlieferung im Mittelalter und in den Vorstellungen vom Mittelalter*, Cologne, Vienna 1975, p. 392, asserted (for post-war western Germany): "Nach 1945 gibt es in der Bundesrepublik de facto kein populäres Mittelalterbild mehr; [. . .]." ("After 1945 there is, de facto, no longer a popular image of the Middle Ages in the *Bundesrepublik*; [. . .]").

31 Many medievalists in higher education find themselves to be the only representative of the period in their departments, see the essays in Kisha G. TRACY / John P. SEXTON (eds.), *The Ballad of the*

well in a 2008 essay on the “never-ending Middle Ages”, one frequently feels, as an adult citizen, a little socially awkward when admitting to studying the Middle Ages.³² As the editors can testify, in the context of dinner parties the confession ‘I am a medieval historian’ more often than not elicits superficial recognition and limited curiosity only to be followed by a rapid end to the exchange. Indeed, it often seems that only children of five or under – imbued, it would appear, with an enduring fascination with knights and castles, battles and dragons – fail to see the revelation of a career choice in Medieval Studies as a conversation stopper. They alone consider ‘medievalist’ a socially acceptable occupation, albeit alongside ‘astronaut’ and ‘princess’.

The Role of the Medievalist in Society

It seems to the editors that this state of affairs is far from satisfactory. While it is certainly good to be placed in the company of explorers and royalty by one sector of society, as both professional historians of the Middle Ages and adult members of that society – and thus ‘responsible citizens’ – we feel that we cannot avoid asking: what is it all *actually* good for? Or, to put it another way: why study medieval history? It is not a new question, and provided the famous starting point for Marc BLOCH’s 1949 “Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien”.³³ Such questions are only superficially one-dimensional. They are motivated by a range of – sometimes contradictory – factors, and the answers they can generate are equally multifaceted. As professional medievalists, we are, of course, interested in sound answers that can justify the future of the discipline we belong to. But an insider’s perspective cannot – and should not – prevent us from thinking about further contexts: as members of contemporary society, we are also interested in assigning our discipline an appropriate place in the world we inhabit. And, as citizens, we are inclined to ask ourselves what our expertise can contribute.

Lone Medievalist, [s. l.] 2018 (eBook). The particular threat posed to Medieval Studies within Literature departments in the United States was highlighted at the joint 2018 MAP-RMMRA conference during a round table discussion, “Challenges and Strategies: Valuing the PreModern in the 21st Century”: it was noted that the University of Oregon’s administration had recently over-ruled a decision by department faculty to appoint to a tenure-track position with a medieval specialism in favour of a modernist.

³² GROEBNER (note 1), pp. 16–17.

³³ Marc BLOCH, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien* [1949], ed. Étienne BLOCH, Paris 1993, p. 69: “Papa, explique moi donc à quoi sert l’histoire.” Various scholars have posed a similar question. See, for example, Ali BENMAKHOLOUF, *Pourquoi lire les philosophes arabes*, Paris 2015 (referring to medieval Arab philosophers, whose contribution to the history of philosophy the author underlines); Didier MÉHU / Néri DE BARROS ALMEIDA / Marcelo CÂNDIDO DA SILVA (eds.), *Pourquoi étudier le Moyen Âge? Les médiévistes face aux usages sociaux du passé*, Paris 2012.

Their respective careers have led the editors, collectively, to practise their craft in a number of countries ranging across Europe – including Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, and Switzerland – to North America and to the relative remoteness of Aotearoa New Zealand. In each we have been confronted with the tension between contemporary needs and our seemingly detached and remote area of study. So, how are professional medievalists supposed to react to the recent developments and what would an appropriate response be? Of course, as in any other academic field, the merits and rewards of our discipline reside first and foremost in the new insights we can offer, recognition by our peers, and our readers' interest. At the same time, we have been – and remain – supported in our work by public funding. We are all, in some sense, the servants of the tax payer. If we assume that Medieval Studies should in fact be funded by the public, which we believe is the best means of preventing the research agenda being dominated by any one special interest group, how can we justify this position in a political landscape that is increasingly defined by ideologies of practical application?³⁴

In current debates, which are widely dominated by questions of utility and pragmatics, of economics and impact, the notion of 'usefulness' often plays an important role.³⁵ This is hardly surprising in a world that is increasingly governed by the logic of growth, the accumulation of wealth, and the monetization of every aspect of life. The idea is encapsulated in "Priority 1" of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's long-term strategy for tertiary education, headed, tellingly: "Delivering skills for industry". It outlines what was the then centre-right government's key aim for the tertiary sector in the following terms: "The priority is to ensure that the skills people develop in tertiary education are well matched to labour market needs". It is a strategy that has little room for Medieval Studies unless we interpret such a field as a pathway to "ensuring tertiary education supports development of transferable skills".³⁶ Such utilitarian policies may well be mocked by academics who might –

34 Obviously, this question applies not only to the field of Medieval Studies, but is equally important, as can be seen in Julien DEMADE and Pierre MONNET's contributions to this volume, in a number of other disciplines in the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

35 See its prominence in the contributions to Florian KIESINGER / Steffen SEISCHAB / Markus MÜLLER / Timo LANG / Angelika STEINACHER / Christine WÖRNERE (eds.), *Wozu Geisteswissenschaften? Kontroverse Argumente für eine überfällige Debatte*, Frankfurt am Main 2003; cf. Beat SITTER-LIVER, *Der Einspruch der Geisteswissenschaften*. *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Rainer J. SCHWEIZER, Freiburg i. Üe. 2002, p. 294. The "VIIIth International Conference of Theory and Philosophy of History" (Viña del Mar, Chile, 30 August–1 September 2017) was dedicated to the question of "The Usefulness of History", online: <http://www.inth.ugent.be/news/conference-usefulness-history> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

36 At the time of writing, the policy remains in place under the centre-left coalition elected in 2017. It defines the required skills as: "addressing new and emerging shortages in specific areas, such as information and communications technology (ICT) and the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills needed for innovation and economic growth." New Zealand Ministry of Education Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014–2019* (9 July 2015), online:

rightly, we believe – argue that the purpose of tertiary education is to develop the ability of the next generation to think critically,³⁷ rather than to create economically productive automata with predictable voting habits. We could go so far as to argue that such policies are in fact a danger to democracy.

Yet, even if we consider the – immediate as well as the ultimate – goal of research not to be the production of ‘useful’ knowledge, but rather of ‘truth’,³⁸ we, personally, would not want to argue for a complete disconnect between the ‘real world’ and an academy that claims the privilege to retire to oft-vilified ‘ivory towers’. But the relationship between the disinterested quest for scientific truth and knowledge and the possible usefulness of its results is by no means as simple and straightforward as one might think. Not least with this in mind, Abraham FLEXNER, the first director of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) at Princeton, New Jersey, made a strong case for the pursuit of ‘useless’ knowledge in science at least as early as 1939. His position was based on the argument that the apparently useless often turned out to become the basis on which useful applications could then be developed.³⁹

Perhaps the best example of ‘pure’ research with ‘useful’ consequences for modern society is that branch of Physics known as quantum mechanics. Amongst other things, it is only the latter’s explanation of semiconductors that enabled the development of the silicon chips on which the bulk of our modern technology is based.⁴⁰ Similarly, research in Mathematics has often run ahead of any obvious deliverable for industry. In Dublin, there is a bridge made famous by the mathematician William Rowan HAMILTON, who, while out walking on 16 October 1843, lacking any writing materials at a moment of inspiration, paused and carved the formula

www.education.govt.nz/further-education/policies-and-strategies/tertiary-education-strategy (last accessed 15/05/2019).

37 See below, note 61, for the important reflexions by Martha NUSSBAUM.

38 See the famous characterisation of the university by Karl JASPERS, *Die Idee der Universität* (Schriften der Universität Heidelberg 1), Berlin, Heidelberg 1946, p. 9: “Die Universität ist die Stätte, an der Gesellschaft und Staat das hellste Bewußtsein des Zeitalters sich entfalten lassen. Dort dürfen als Lehrer und Schüler Menschen zusammenkommen, die hier nur den Beruf haben, Wahrheit zu ergreifen. Denn daß irgendwo bedingungslose Wahrheitsforschung stattfindet, ist ein Anspruch des Menschen als Menschen.” (“The university is the location where society and state let the brightest consciousness of the age unfold itself. There people may come together as teachers and students, who have only one occupation, namely to seize truth. Because that somewhere the unconditional research of truth should take place, is a claim of mankind as mankind.”)

39 Abraham FLEXNER, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, in: *Harper’s Magazine* 179 (October 1939), pp. 544–552; see ID., *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*. With a companion essay by Robbert DIJKGRAAF, Princeton 2017.

40 For a layman’s guide to the ‘usefulness’ of quantum mechanics: James KAKALIOS, *The Amazing Story of Quantum Mechanics: A Math-Free Exploration of the Science That Made Our World*, London 2010.

for quaternions ($i^2 = j^2 = k^2 = ijk = -1$) into the stone.⁴¹ Quaternions only really came into their own a hundred and fifty years later, as a tool for 3D modelling.

On foundations rooted in the belief that there was a usefulness in useless knowledge, FLEXNER justified the orientation of the IAS as an institution that was entirely dedicated to pure and theoretical research, without any conscious orientation towards the production of ‘useful’ results: FLEXNER himself spoke of “a paradise for scholars”.⁴² Yet, while the existence of institutions like the IAS might be desirable and welcome, they certainly do not represent the majority of academic institutions, which are increasingly driven by ideas of ‘usefulness’ and profitability.⁴³ The question thus becomes: should the Humanities in general – and Medieval Studies in particular – heed the call to become more ‘useful’?

Some might argue that such a reaction in fact constitutes an inevitable necessity, one which might even help the Humanities to re-establish their profile: they have much to offer that needs only to be adequately pointed out. Yet, others remain profoundly negative. At the 2007 meeting of the French SHMESP (the *Société des Historiens Médiévistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur Public*), for example, a round table discussed the potential for a dialogue between (medieval) historians and the Social Sciences, with an implicit underlying discourse concerning the question of medievalists’ social engagement.⁴⁴ While some argued for the inherent moral obligation of historians to make their work relevant to the societies in which they live,⁴⁵ others insisted on their right to analyse meticulously their objects of

41 See online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broom_Bridge (last accessed 15/05/2019).

42 FLEXNER (note 36), *Usefulness*, p. 552. On the role of the IAS as sanctuary for refugee scholars see Laura SMITH PORTER, *From Intellectual Sanctuary to Social Responsibility. The Founding of the Institute for Advanced Study, 1930–1933*, Ann Arbor 1988.

43 For a recent survey, see: Ron SRIGLEY, *Whose University Is It Anyway?*, in: *Los Angeles Review of Books* (22 February 2018), online: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/whose-university-is-it-anyway/> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

44 The question of social engagement and the dialogue between historical research and contemporary society was addressed explicitly during the discussions. This specific aspect of the debate is, however, only partly documented in the proceedings of the conference, see *SOCIÉTÉ DES HISTORIENS MÉDIÉVISTES DE L’ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR PUBLIC* (ed.), *Être historien du Moyen Âge au XXI^e siècle. XXXVIII^e Congrès de la SHMESP, Paris 2008*, esp. Nicolas OFFENSTADT, *L’“histoire politique” de la fin du Moyen Âge. Quelques discussions*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 179–198, and Jean-Patrice BOUDET / Nicolas WEILL-PAROT, *Être historien des sciences et de la magie médiévales aujourd’hui: apports et limites des sciences sociales*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 199–230.

45 Amongst the most active, one might mention Nicolas OFFENSTADT, presently maître de conférences (lecturer) at the Université Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne). Enjoying a strong media presence, mostly as a specialist of the First World War, OFFENSTADT was also a founding member of the “Comité de Vigilance face aux Usages Publics de l’Histoire”, created in 2005. For the current activities of this group of French historians, see online: <http://cvuh.blogspot.de/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). See also Laurence DE COCK / Mathilde LARRÈRE / Guillaume MAZEAU, *L’Histoire comme émancipation*, Marseille 2019, here pp. 52–53.

scientific predilection in a manner entirely disconnected (as they argued) from any possible link to modern society. After all, had not Lucien Febvre already asserted as long ago as 1919 that “a History that serves is an enslaved History” (“une histoire qui sert est une histoire servie”)?⁴⁶

One might, of course, ask whether a total disconnect between two historically connected cultures is ever really possible. One response would be that it is *not* – for the simple reason that the past is always understood and shaped via the lens of the present. At its most extreme, this perspective has led some post-modernists, most notably Hayden WHITE, to characterize History as a discipline as nothing more than a particular form of narration, a point we will return to.⁴⁷ In any case, it is curious to see one of the protagonists of the ‘detached’ position fervently argue against the ‘recent rise of global history (especially in Medieval Studies), on the grounds that pupils and students should first learn the historical facts and information that concern their own country.⁴⁸ Not only does this kind of argument ignore the importance of migration as an historical factor,⁴⁹ but it actually undermines the claim for the total independence of the field from society. To take but the French example: large numbers of pupils whose forebears migrated into the country over the course of the last century (to leave it at that), would have a hard time describing either the Gauls or the Merovingians as ‘their predecessors’, people with whom they should, according to traditional curricula, develop a

46 Quoted in François HARTOG, *Régimes d’historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Édition augmentée, Paris 2012, p. 186.

47 Hayden WHITE, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1987. For an overview: BENTLEY, *Modern Historiography* (note 12), pp. 137–148; see also Otto G. OEXLE, ‘Das Mittelalter’ – Bilder gedeuteter Geschichte, in: BAK et al. (note 3), pp. 21–43 and 345–349, here pp. 22–24, 39, and Paul VEYNE, *Comment on écrit l’histoire. Essai d’épistémologie*, 2nd ed. Paris 1996, pp. 23–26.

48 Nicolas WEILL-PAROT, *Recherche historique et “mondialisation”: vrais enjeux et fausses questions. L’exemple de la science médiévale*, in: *Revue historique* 316 (2014), pp. 655–673. WEILL-PAROT’s critical comments concern, most explicitly, the publications by his fellow French historians Patrick BOUCHERON and Jérôme BASCHET (*ibid.*, pp. 657–658). Interestingly, WEILL-PAROT stresses the importance of history as a means to ‘know yourself’ (along the lines of the ancient Greek locution attributed to Socrates), but at the same time decries “les risques d’une histoire utilitariste” (“the risks of a utilitarian history”), see *ibid.*, pp. 671–673. It should be noted that WEILL-PAROT’s research represents an important contribution on the impact of Arabic scientific knowledge on high and late medieval astrology and science, see, for example, Nicolas WEILL-PAROT, *Les “images astrologiques” au Moyen âge et à la Renaissance: spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques, XII^e–XV^e siècle (Sciences, techniques et civilisations du Moyen âge à l’aube des Lumières 6)*, Paris 2002.

49 Current popular debates, which often combine a notable lack of information with extremely polemical attitudes, serve to illustrate the importance of pertinent knowledge in establishing an historical and transcultural perspective. For relevant recent contributions by medievalists in this particular arena see Michael BORGOLTE (ed.), *Migrationen im Mittelalter. Ein Handbuch*, Berlin, Boston 2014, and Dominique GARCIA / Hervé LE BRAS (eds.), *Archéologie des migrations*, Paris 2017.

privileged relationship.⁵⁰ If there really was a complete disconnect between the work of historians and current social practices, there would be no reason to be concerned about the replacement of traditional ‘national’ narratives and content with more ‘globalized’ perspectives. The exception would be if an author wished to argue that History should actually serve the – quite utilitarian – aim of furnishing pupils and students with a sense of national belonging rather than being a pathway via which the capacity for critical historical analysis and thinking are developed. We prefer to call this latter what it is: the socially acceptable face of a resurgent nationalism.

The above example can, of course, not claim to be universally representative: in fact, French historical culture and the debates it generates are vivid and important, especially in comparison with countries like Germany. But even if France constituted a unique case, its debates do illustrate recent trends that can be observed, to a greater or lesser degree, in other countries as well. There is undeniably a growing tension between different attitudes towards History, and in particular to national histories. While a number of authors insist on the need to innovate in Medieval Studies by, for example, including elements of global history, others underline the importance of more traditional positions for the development of ‘national identity’.⁵¹ The origin of these tensions lies, in part, in the profound change that took place in attitudes towards the Middle Ages after 1945; to a certain degree, they are also a result of the internal debates that began in the closing decades of the twentieth century, and that continue to shape the profession’s understanding of itself.

Medieval History’s emergence as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century was intrinsically linked to Europe’s ‘national projects’.⁵² Seen from the

50 This observation lies behind the publication of William BLANC / Christophe NAUDIN, *Charles Martel et la bataille de Poitiers. De l’histoire au mythe identitaire*, Paris 2015, who propose deconstructing the historical myth built up around the battle of Poitiers, which has painted the battle as the crucial moment that allegedly saved Christian Europe from the dangers of a Muslim onslaught. During a speech to commemorate the hundredth birthday of Nelson MANDELA, the former US President, Barack OBAMA, turned an analogous observation into an efficient pun when he observed, with regard to the positive effects of diversity in a society: “And if you doubt that, just ask the French football team that just won the World Cup. Because not all of those folks – not all of those folks look like Gauls to me. But they’re French. They’re French.” Online: <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/nelson-mandela-annual-lecture-2018-obamas-full-speech> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

51 In France, where this debate draws an important public, the two poles were represented at the time of writing by Patrick BOUCHERON (ed.), *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Paris 2017, on the one hand, and Nicolas WEILL-PAROT / Véronique SALES (eds.), *Le vrai visage du Moyen Age. Au-delà des idées reçues*, Paris 2017, on the other.

52 See, for example, Isabelle GUYOT-BACHY / Jean-Marie MOEGLIN (eds.), *La naissance de la médiévistique. Les historiens et leurs sources en Europe (XIX^e–début du XX^e siècle)* (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sciences Historiques et Philologiques 5 / Hautes études médiévales et modernes 107), Geneva 2015. With a stronger focus on the ideological implications, see the publications in the series “Writing the Nation”, for example, Stefan BERGER / Chris LORENZ (eds.),

perspective of those keen to defend the integrity of the emerging nation-state, an important task of History consisted in furnishing the basis for a nation's legitimacy by providing a narrative of its venerable age and the heroic deeds of its founders, its people, and its ruling dynasties. The medieval period thus became of the utmost importance as an element in nation building. It led to the construction of the Middle Ages as the crucible in which nations such as Britain, France, and Germany were forged. Historians of the Middle Ages furnished detailed and elaborate master narratives: they were, in a sense, the chief 'myth makers' of Europe's national projects.⁵³

In the course of the twentieth century, a series of quite different developments profoundly unsettled the privileged position of the Middle Ages in the popular consciousness: on the one hand, the shocking experience of two world wars, and of the reactionary nationalism that accompanied the second in particular, largely discredited the category of the 'nation-state' as a fundamental framework for the writing of history. This was especially true in Germany, but there were also repercussions beyond the German borders.⁵⁴ Myths of 'national character' forged in a distant medieval past had served the nineteenth-century imperialists of Britain, Germany, and France well; yet, with their focus on the distinctive origins of 'peoples' and the relationship between those peoples and specific territories, it was an uncomfortable truth that they also played their part in shaping the mentalities that had led to the Holocaust. At the same time, a series of theoretical and methodological debates within the

Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe (Writing the Nation 4), Basingstoke 2010 (2nd ed. 2015).

⁵³ See Patrick GEARY, *The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton 2002. It is curious to note that the critical deconstruction of the nation-state as the 'default' category for historical interpretation may have given way to the creation of new myths (in the form of new master-narratives) in which 'Europe' replaces the nation-state as the fundamental and enduring cultural unit allegedly created in the Middle Ages. On this point, see Klaus OSHEMA, *Ein Karl für alle Fälle – Historiographische Verortungen Karls des Großen zwischen Nation, Europa und der Welt*, in: Gregor FEINDT / Félix KRAWATZEK / Daniela MEHLER / Friedemann PESTEL / Rieke TRIMČEV (eds.), *Europäische Erinnerung als verflochtene Erinnerung. Vielstimmige und vielschichtige Vergangenheitsdeutungen jenseits der Nation (Formen der Erinnerung 55)*, Göttingen 2014, pp. 39–63, here p. 41.

⁵⁴ See Winfried SCHULZE, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945 (Historische Zeitschrift. Beihefte N. F. 10)*, Munich 1989. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, some individual authors were already calling for a new history written within a European framework; others underlined the importance of 'universal history', see Klaus OSHEMA, *Bilder von Europa im Mittelalter (Mittelalter-Forschungen 43)*, Ostfildern 2013, pp. 51–60. On the (possible) conceptual distinctions between the 'universal history' envisaged in the 1950s and the more recent developments that favour a 'global history' of the Middle Ages, see Michael BORGOLTE, *Wie Weltgeschichte erforscht werden kann. Ein Projekt zum interkulturellen Vergleich im mittelalterlichen Jahrtausend*, in: *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 43(1) (2016), pp. 1–25, and *ID.*, *Mittelalter in der größeren Welt. Eine europäische Kultur in globaler Perspektive*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 295 (2012), pp. 35–61.

historical disciplines in the second half of the twentieth century unsettled the very foundations of the writing of History itself. These latter have certainly made classes in historiography more interesting, but they have also had important consequences for historians' relationship with the broader public.⁵⁵

A series of so-called 'turns' – including the 'linguistic' turn – coupled with the critical perspective of (radical) constructivism and findings in the field of neurosciences forced professional historians to doubt the certainty of their reconstructions of the past.⁵⁶ While these important developments provided essential methodological and theoretical insights, one unfortunate side-effect was to distance much of the historical profession from the broader public by removing a key attribute that had made them so valuable to the nineteenth century's national projects: their ability to convey 'truth' with certainty.

If past reality is, for the most part, only accessible through the means of texts that have gone through the distorting filter of the human mind, with all the uncertainties of the influence of perception, let alone of varying interests, it seems hardly possible to develop one singular 'true' narrative of past reality. In spite of popular assumptions to the contrary, history is not just there to be 'found' in ancient manuscripts and other evidence. While these artefacts do connect us with the past in the sense that they have been produced by individuals in times long gone, they do not contain 'history' in a pure state that can readily be 'discovered'. All they can do is provide data that enable us today to write an evidence-based narrative.⁵⁷ The – sometimes quite fierce – debates concerning these insights and observations doubtless fertilized and enriched academic discourse. They invited professional historians to develop new perspectives and to criticize the well-established narratives that they had become fond of. At the same time,

55 The pertinent developments concern methodological questions as well as questions of scope and the choice of subjects. For the former see, for example, the brief overview by Hans-Jürgen GOERTZ, *Unsichere Geschichte. Zur Theorie historischer Referentialität*, Stuttgart 2001; for the latter Nicolas OFFENSTADT, *L'historiographie (Que sais-je? 3933)*, Paris 2011, esp. pp. 83–97. For an introduction to the topic, see the essays in parts IV and V of Michael BENTLEY (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, London 1997, and Georg G. IGGERS, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 2nd ed. Middleton / CT 2005, esp. part III: "History and the Challenge of Postmodernism". Concerning the history of Medieval Studies in North America and the implications of these developments in particular: Gabrielle M. SPIEGEL, In the Mirror's Eye: The Writing of Medieval History in America, in: Anthony MOLHO / Gordon S. WOOD (eds.), *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, Princeton 1998, pp. 238–262.

56 See GOERTZ (note 52) and Otto G. OEXLE, *Von Fakten und Fiktionen. Zu einigen Grundsatzfragen der historischen Erkenntnis*, in: Johannes LAUDAGE (ed.), *Von Fakten und Fiktionen. Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2003, pp. 1–42, and ID., "Facts and Fiction". On the Current Fundamental Crisis in History, in: Salvador RUS RUFINO (ed.), *Historia, filosofía y política en la Europa moderna y contemporánea. Conferencias inaugurales del acuerdo Universidad de León, León 2004*, pp. 101–117.

57 OEXLE, 'Das Mittelalter' (note 44), p. 39; VEYNE (note 44), p. 23: "L'histoire est un récit d'événements vrais." ("History is the account of true events.")

they threatened the standing of professional historians who embraced them in the eyes of the wider public: those who engaged with these debates could no longer lay claim to the historian's traditional role as the source of an absolute historical 'truth'.

The recent popularity of histories that adopt an air of nostalgia for the traditional narrative, such as those of Melvyn BRAGG, Lorànt DEUTSCH, or Jean-Christian PETITFILS, suggests that a significant section of the wider public have become increasingly unsettled and dissatisfied with an academic discourse that risks dissolving many of the established narratives of society's past.⁵⁸ Where is the 'true' narrative? Where is the account of 'what happened'? While critical innovations might force historians to tread much more carefully, it is worth noting that they do not exclude the possibility of demonstrating the defectiveness of certain presentations of the past. Yet this type of 'negative certainty' is by no means identical with an attempt to create some kind of 'new positivism' that would enable the re-establishment of old-fashioned 'definitive' narratives. In a curious turn of events, proponents of the political right have been able to turn these methodological advancements and critical instruments against professional historians, who, in questioning traditional narratives, often came to be perceived as far too left-wing and liberal from the point of view of conservative groups.⁵⁹ If professional historians

58 For example: Melvyn BRAGG, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611–2011*, London 2011; Lorànt DEUTSCH, *Métronome*, Neuilly-sur-Seine 2009; Jean-Christian PETITFILS, *Histoire de la France. Le vrai roman national*, Paris 2018. The latter positions himself explicitly against recent approaches that globalize and deconstruct the well-established older master-narratives in order to defend the latter, *ibid.*, p. 11: "L'Histoire n'est pas l'instrumentalisation de petits récits éclatés, mise au service d'une vision communautariste et multiculturelle, ainsi que l'ont présentée Patrick BOUCHERON et son équipe (*Histoire mondiale de la France*, 2017), vision critiquée aussi bien par l'Obs (Pierre NORA) que par Le Figaro (Ran HALEVI) comme une défiguration de la vérité par l'idéologie." The very fact that PETITFILS continues by underlining that "Or, c'est la conception même de la nation qui est en jeu" ("the very concept of the nation is at stake") demonstrates the absurdity of his criticism: he justifies his efforts with reference to exactly the same ideological foundation that he criticizes in his 'adversaries'. For a critical survey see DE COCK / LARRÈRE / MAZEAU (note 45).

59 An anti-intellectual stance frequently characterizes right-wing positions: hence proponents of the Swiss right-wing party SVP (Schweizerische Volkspartei) frequently defame academic historians as notoriously left-wing and thus 'anti-national'. Critical analyses that tend to deconstruct scientifically widespread popular myths, such as, for example, Guy MARCHAL, *Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte. Geschichtsbilder, Mythenbildung und nationale Identität*, Basel 2006, are systematically denigrated. The remarkable rift between the left and right's images of history in Switzerland is clearly visible in the agitated debates that surrounded the five-hundredth anniversary of the battle of Marignano: while right-wing presentations insist that Marignano represents the beginning of Swiss neutrality, academic historians underline the necessity to differentiate, amongst others, between contemporary perspectives and later developments and interpretations. See, for example, Thomas MAISSEN, *Schweizer Heldengeschichten – und was dahintersteckt*, Baden 2016, pp. 104–115 (ch. 6), and *Id.*, *Seit wann ist die Schweiz "neutral seit Marignano"? Zu den Wurzeln eines nationalpädagogischen Topos*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 68(2) (2018), pp. 214–239, esp. pp. 235–239.

claimed that they could not produce certainty about the past, why bother listening to them at all? The historians who side-stepped or attacked these debates could now claim, seemingly unchallenged, the validity of their own 'common sense' version of the past.⁶⁰

Confronted with nostalgic and conservative renderings of the past as simple and attractive (a counter-weight to the complexity of the modern world), professional scholars who engage in the debates that continue to re-shape the discipline risk losing ground to populists happy to provide the public with a 'straightforward' account of history. It is undeniable that professional historians have done a remarkably poor job of engaging the public in their complex internal debate. Instead, unaccountably disappointed that wider society appears disinterested, at least some have retreated to the ivory tower and pulled up the drawbridge by employing a vocabulary, often borrowed from literary criticism, that few understand. Others have withdrawn into the comforting pseudo-intellectual hair-splitting and barely disguised name-calling of the reviews' column of their favourite journal. The overall effect is particularly threatening to professional Medieval Studies. On the one hand, there are genuine academic developments that force us to recognize that apprehending the past is only partially feasible; on the other, the Middle Ages are suffering a progressive loss of importance as the object of serious research because professional medieval scholars no longer serve the traditional social function that they once did.

One might argue that the Middle Ages' role as a romantic otherworld that allows us to flee the increasing complexity of a globalized and confusing Modernity only becomes a problem for Medieval Studies because professional medievalists are, in fact, excellent representatives of their respective disciplines: they take the implications of the theoretical debates and the insights those debates furnish seriously. To take but one example: we have learned to understand individual and collective identities as constructed entities in, for example, the case of nations. This does not mean that 'nations' did not in fact exist.⁶¹ However, as a consequence, it becomes impossible to satisfy the quest of some parts of the public to find a reassur-

60 One example of this backwards-oriented, anti-intellectual tendency that argues strongly against methodological and thematic innovations is furnished by WEILL-PAROT / SALES (note 48). It has to be said, though, that many of the contributors who were interviewed for this collection seem to have tried to provide a more nuanced picture than the quite tendentious questions allow, see, for example, Philippe CONTAMINE, *La France, une idée anachronique au Moyen Âge?*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 9–25. It is hardly a coincidence that a series of recent conservative publications choose to include the word 'truth' in their titles, see, for example, PETITFILS (note 55).

61 The much cited and influential study of reference is Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. London 1991 (orig. 1983).

ing stability in the history of ‘their’ origin.⁶² If unsettled members of contemporary societies turn towards history in order to obtain a reassuring sense of stability, and this entails the highly problematic side-effect of excluding other members of society not considered part of that imagined past, professional scholars simply cannot provide them with the reassurance they seek and at the same time continue to take their job seriously. And yet this brings us to the crux of the problem, the gap between the public’s expectations and scholars’ ability to provide answers that take account of the principles that define their profession. The failure of scholars to bridge that growing chasm contributes to the popular impression that modern research in Medieval Studies – but also more generally in the Humanities and sometimes also the Social Sciences – are essentially ‘useless’ to society in general.

It is thus hardly surprising that the international academic world is witness to a number of initiatives that seek to diminish funding for allegedly useless Humanities or Social Science subjects. In the United States, in particular, recent cuts in funding have been either proposed by politicians or implemented based on the argument that the disciplines in question, and the insights they furnish, are practically useless and do not promote the national interest.⁶³ This ongoing debate illustrates the dangers of an argument based on ‘usefulness’, which does not furnish a level playing field with the so-called ‘hard’ sciences. The latter can often (but by no means always) argue in favour of the practical benefits of insights and inventions that result from their work. The Humanities and Social Sciences have a much harder time providing concrete arguments for their (positive) practical effects. This, of course, does not mean that those effects do not exist: as Martha NUSSBAUM convincingly points out, the Humanities and the way of thinking that they teach us, can (and, indeed, must) be regarded as an important basis for the education of mature and able citizens who will become competent members of modern democracies.⁶⁴ Thus they fulfil a vital condition for the existence of a system of political order that most countries deem to be the best and most adequate choice for a modern and enlightened society. One cannot stress this enough,

62 This ‘problem’ becomes even more evident when one includes data from the ‘hard’ sciences, such as DNA-analyses. See, for example, Alistair MOFFAT, *The Scots: A Genetic Journey*, Edinburgh 2011, a work intended for a popular readership, which demonstrates the Scottish population’s high level of genetic diversity.

63 See, for example, the timeline and quotations provided by Social Science Space, online: <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2016/01/timeline-of-us-government-and-socialbehavioral-science> (last accessed 15/05/2019). Cf. for a defence of Social Sciences, Jonathan MICHIE / Cary L. COOPER (eds.), *Why the Social Sciences Matter*, Basingstoke 2015.

64 Martha NUSSBAUM, *Not For Profit. Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton 2010. This debate is, of course, ongoing; for a contribution in the context of recent developments in US politics and media: Paula MARANTZ COHEN, *The Humanities’ Decline Makes Us Morally Obtuse*, in: *The Wall Street Journal* (21 September 2018), online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-humanities-decline-makes-us-morally-obtuse-1537566941> (last accessed 15/05/2019). See also, with a focus on History, DE COCK / LARRÈRE / MAZEAU (note 45).

especially since this ongoing project of education and of the transmission of the vital critical spirit to future generations is not only a never-ending story, but, moreover, because its effects tend to be much less spectacular than the new insights and techniques derived from the hard sciences that have given us computers, smartphones, etc. In contrast to dazzling technological innovations, the outcome of successful education in the disciplines that form the Humanities and the Social Sciences will contribute primarily to upholding, and perhaps even improving, a political system that is worth living in (something that many western politicians benefit from but seem to take for granted). There are, in addition, further beneficial insights that critical engagement with medieval subjects can entail once they are brought into a comparative perspective with contemporary phenomena, and these doubtless merit further attention.⁶⁵

From Usefulness to Relevance

Research in the fields of the Humanities and the Social Sciences should not be a limited endeavour: far beyond the need to give future generations a chance to become mature and critical citizens, these fields effectively help to identify and understand a broad range of problematic areas in our societies and thus contribute to providing solutions. And it is on this particular and constructive contribution of the Humanities, or, more precisely, of the discipline of Medieval Studies, that we will focus in this volume. Given the – rightly – controversial debates about the dangers of the quest to make scientific research ‘useful’, we have opted consciously for the vocabulary of ‘relevance’. We are aware that the distinction is not always clear-cut.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, we would argue that ‘relevance’ conveys an idea of importance that surpasses the notion of immediate application as evoked by ‘usefulness’. We feel this has the major advantage of inviting both readers and contributors to identify effects and connections that may already be there but that have eluded us because we have not focussed sufficiently on recognizing them. In addition, the notion of relevance conveys a particular idea of importance and applicability that does not boil down to immediate practical ‘use’. Rather, it leaves room for inspiration and the insight that some elements of knowledge may need to be further refined and transformed before the benefits become apparent.

⁶⁵ See above, note 26.

⁶⁶ See, for example, the critical remarks by Mahmood MAMDANI, *The African University*, in: *London Review of Books* 40(14) (19 July 2018), pp. 29–32, online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n14/mahmood-mamdani/the-african-university> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

This latter idea can be illustrated by a simple example. When confronted with the contemporary tensions and conflicts that are mostly, and to a large extent erroneously, formulated in religious terms, such as the conflicts between Christians in Europe and the Muslim minorities that have made the continent their home, one might be tempted to turn to high medieval Sicily or to the famous *convivencia* of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in medieval Iberia in order to establish how peaceful coexistence might be organized efficiently.⁶⁷ But this approach inevitably leads to disappointment: not only was the ‘multi-religious’ past far less conflict-free than is often claimed, but the fundamental parameters of highly religious pre-modern societies make the hope of learning anything useful from an immediate comparison nothing less than futile. In addition, the societies in question were organized as monarchies and feudal societies, which did not cultivate the idea of human rights, but rather attributed a very specific place, with specific privileges, duties, and handicaps, to every individual. These comments are not supposed to imply, however, that critical analysis of the distant past is useless per se. To the contrary, we hold that it can make us aware of specific differences, of alterities, that make us realise that some of the culturally constructed ideas and conceptions we take for granted are in fact highly contingent. And the potential insights are by no means limited to the identification of alterities. We might also be able to identify structural analogies between medieval societies and cultures and our own, which, in turn, force us to rethink drawing a strict dividing line between the medieval and the modern. One example would be the potential relevance of concepts of legal pluralism in Magna Carta for contemporary debate in Aotearoa New Zealand concerning indigenous rights.⁶⁸

As will have become clear, our approach to the question of the ‘relevance’ of the Middle Ages does not seek to provide yet another series of reflections on the well-established motif of the importance of History – and by implication Medieval History – for the creation of identity. In fact, in a world that becomes ever more globalized and that witnesses migrations that might well exceed anything humans have hitherto experienced, we feel that such ‘identity-based’ arguments are inevitably bound to lose their force. Nationalist fairy tales might satisfy those who feel the need for something reassuring, but this does not make them any less simplistic

⁶⁷ Amongst the numerous publications on these questions see, for example, the critical analysis by Mark R. COHEN, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1994; cf. the contributions in Matthias M. TISCHLER / Alexander FIDORA (eds.), *Christlicher Norden – Muslimischer Süden. Ansprüche und Wirklichkeiten von Christen, Juden und Muslimen auf der Iberischen Halbinsel im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter* (Erudiri Sapientia 7), Münster 2011. For Italy, see Alex METCALFE, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys), Edinburgh 2009.

⁶⁸ Chris JONES, *Mana and Magna Carta: Locating New Legacies in a Post-Colonial Society*, in: Stephen WINTER / Chris JONES (eds.), *Magna Carta and New Zealand – History, Law and Politics in Aotearoa*, Cham 2017, pp. 229–251.

fantasies. It was *never* true that the ‘Germans’, the ‘French’, the ‘English’, the ‘Russians’, the ‘Swiss’, or the ‘Chinese’ formed stable groups with a common ancestry that lived from the dawn of time on the ground they now inhabit. In this regard, a large number of the peoples that lived in medieval Europe were in fact closer to the truth than modern adherents of the idea of a stable national history: the idea of migration and the acquisition of new homelands is one of the most widespread motifs in medieval *origo gentis* narratives.⁶⁹ As a consequence, the ‘real’ story about anyone’s past is inevitably a story of migration and of the blending of different influences over time.⁷⁰ Our origin stories are necessarily fragmented. You are, as Kurt WEILL and Ogden NASH very neatly put it, a stranger here yourself.

While we consider the more limited argument of ‘identity’ to be unpromising, we feel that there are several other approaches the medievalist can furnish and contribute to answering contemporary questions. And they may even offer solutions to contemporary problems. This volume cannot claim to give a comprehensive overview of the areas to which Medieval Studies is potentially (or actually) relevant. Instead, we want to achieve two things: to present a limited, but, we believe, representative choice of different contexts and backgrounds that demonstrate the fertility and relevance of Medieval Studies; and to begin a wider debate that invites further reflection within the academy. And if this book achieves a wider audience – although we recognize that is an unlikely fate for an academic collection of essays! – we hope it may make some small contribution to encouraging the broader public to consider the value of our field.

What to Expect from this Collection

Our choice of topics has been limited from the outset as this publication is principally intended to unite a series of contributions to two academic events: in November 2015, with the support of the British Academy’s Rising Star Engagement Award, Conor

69 For an excellent introduction to the topic, Susan REYNOLDS, *Medieval Origines Gentium* and the Community of the Realm, in: *History* 68 (1983), pp. 375–390; see more recently Alheydis PLASSMANN, *Origo gentis. Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen (Orbis mediaevalis 7)*, Berlin 2006, pp. 360–362, and Michael BERNSEN / Matthias BECHER / Elke BRÜGGEN (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas im Mittelalter*, Göttingen 2013.

70 For a strictly ‘scientific’ perspective, although conveyed in a popular narrative, see MOFFAT (note 59). For the British case, see also Stephen LESLIE / Bruce WINNEY / Garrett HELLENTHAL / Dan DAVISON / Abdelhamid BOUMERTIT / Tammy DAY / Katarzyna HUTNIK / Ellen C. ROYRVIK / Barry CUNLIFFE / WELLCOME TRUST CASE CONTROL CONSORTIUM 2 / INTERNATIONAL MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS GENETICS CONSORTIUM / Daniel J. LAWSON / Daniel FALUSH / Colin FREEMAN / Matti PIRINEN / Simon MYERS / Mark ROBINSON / Peter DONNELLY / Walter BODMER, The fine-scale genetic structure of the British population, in: *Nature* 519 (19 March 2015), pp. 309–314.

KOSTICK organized a two-day conference on “Making the Medieval Relevant” at the University of Nottingham. Happily, he accepted an invitation to contribute to two sessions and a round table discussion organized by Chris JONES and Klaus OSHEMA at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in July 2016, “Are the Middle Ages Relevant?”, held under the aegis of Australasia’s ANZAMEMS and the German Mediävistenverband. The contributions to these two events now form the backbone to the present volume. In order to present a tableau that truly demonstrates the wide-ranging relevance of Medieval Studies, however, the editors invited further papers and were pleased to receive a number of important contributions covering fields that range from climate science and genetics to education.⁷¹

The volume has been divided into three sections: ‘Science’, ‘Education’, and ‘Society’. These divisions are primarily intended to enable the reader to navigate the collection more easily, but they also indicate the key areas where we believe Medieval Studies is most relevant today. We begin, in ‘Science’, with the component of our case for the relevance of Medieval Studies that is most likely to convince an audience beyond the Humanities. In a series of four essays our contributors demonstrate the value of medieval scholarship to the so-called ‘hard’ sciences by examining the way in which medievalists can contribute to exploring and resolving some of the key issues that confront the contemporary world. In two very different essays, first Tobias KLUGE and Maximilian SCHUH and then Conor KOSTICK and Francis LUDLOW illustrate the varied and important contributions that medieval scholars make to the ongoing exploration of climate science, study of which fundamentally effects our continued existence on this planet. In spite of what many choose to believe, ‘hard scientists’ do, indeed, need to cooperate with historians in order to make sense of their evidence: this begins with questions of chronological calibration and continues with the task of broader contextualization that makes the social and cultural repercussions of climatic events and developments visible. With a very different focus, Jörg FEUCHTER then considers the value of knowledge of the Middle Ages in the genetics lab: while DNA-analysis can certainly contribute to solving a number of medievalists’ questions, FEUCHTER plausibly argues that the relationship between DNA-researchers and historians is by no means a one-way street. To the contrary, medievalists can contribute important material and the necessary knowledge to provide insights into questions of immediate contemporary importance, beginning with data on migration, but also including questions of epigenetic change. Finally, Freya HARRISON and Erin CONNELLY demonstrate the real potential benefits of analysing medieval knowledge for modern medicine. Contrary to popular portrayals of medieval medical practice as fantastical and bizarre,

⁷¹ With regard to genetics, see also Elsbeth BÖSL, *Doing Ancient DNA. Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte der aDNA-Forschung*, Bielefeld 2017.

centuries of careful observation on the healing properties of various plants when prepared in a variety of ways contributed to the development of effective medicines in the Middle Ages. Reviving these recipes and improving them using modern techniques offers a new way to derive cures for conditions where anti-microbial resistance has undermined what used to be our most effective treatments.

Our section on 'Education' comprises three discrete perspectives. The first two focus on the tertiary sector: Julien DEMADE considers the changing place of the medieval in French higher education and what it might tell us about society more generally. He applies a deliberately structural perspective, which enables him to underline that the relative loss in importance of Medieval Studies is by no means unique to this discipline. Rather, DEMADE claims, it constitutes merely one example of a veritable landslide that orientates capitalist elites towards more lucrative and specialized, albeit younger disciplines, for their education. Chris JONES and Madi WILLIAMS choose, on the other hand, to focus on the contribution that the teaching of Europe's Middle Ages can make to Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural policy. While exploring the broader significance of medieval scholarship in addressing colonial legacies, the chapter argues that medieval history is an excellent vehicle for better integrating Aotearoa's official policy of biculturalism into university curricula. However, it also suggests that in order to do this effectively the way in which the subject is taught in universities requires adjustment to integrate comparison with indigenous Māori culture and values. Laura DI STEFANO, meanwhile, considers a case study in medieval travel writing that may improve the modern tourist's understanding of their encounter with medieval Venice.

In 'Society' we look at five case studies, each of which reflects on what exploring a medieval topic may – and actually should – tell us about ourselves and the world in which we live, beginning with Klaus OSCEMA's examination of 'expert culture'. His contribution takes up an idea that is axiomatic to this volume, namely that expertise in Medieval Studies is valuable to a better understanding of contemporary society and its workings. Analysing the social role of late medieval astrologers, whom he proposes to compare to modern financial and economic experts, OSCEMA characterizes the Middle Ages as a 'laboratory'. This enables us to better calibrate the sometimes erroneous self-descriptions of our own societies provided by the Social Sciences, descriptions which focus on modern societies as 'rationally' organized and as being peopled by individuals who act 'rationally'. Exploring the medieval culture of expertise provides a valuable point of reflection on this concept. Then, in the company of Elva JOHNSTON and Hélène SIRANTOINE, we consider two very different case studies, one focussed on the relationship between medieval history and early twentieth-century Irish nationalism, the other on the issue of religious tensions in contemporary Europe and the oft-idealized image of cooperation between Muslims and Christians in medieval Iberia. Both illustrate the importance of understanding what can be said about *what actually happened* in the Middle Ages. We then explore, with Niamh WYCHERLEY and Ben JERVIS, the way in which medieval expertise can provide a different window on to

modern problems. WYCHERLEY considers our understanding of the enduring power of relics and what it might say about the culture of celebrity in contemporary society, while JERVIS examines what a case study that looks at archaeological evidence from a medieval town can tell us about the idea of resilience.

We close the volume by returning, with Pierre MONNET, to some broader reflections on the value of Medieval Studies in today's world. Like the collection as a whole and the Leeds round table that helped inspire it, this latter contribution does not seek to provide the reader with definitive answers to the relevance of Medieval Studies. Nor have the editors sought to present every conceivable example of the way in which studying the Middle Ages may be relevant to the contemporary world. We largely exclude, for example, the kind of 'therapeutic' and cathartic value attributed to history by, for example, Patrick BOUCHERON.⁷² Other problems and subjects that we will not explicitly engage with include the important relationship between historical knowledge and questions of social justice⁷³ and the intensively scrutinized question of the 'abuse of history' for ideologically charged political purposes.⁷⁴

The attentive reader will doubtless note the absence of further fields that would merit discussion. These include the question of what historians of the pre-modern period might contribute to the current debate concerning the crises that endanger cultural heritage in politico-religious conflicts⁷⁵ as well as the fiercely debated question of Medieval Studies' own tendency to marginalize certain peoples and groups.⁷⁶ Finally, there are also different views on the question of the very notions of the 'Middle Ages' and 'medieval'. Are these not, in fact, misleading terms that actually impede the development of new insights that might be gained, for example, by adopting more globalized perspectives?⁷⁷ As editors of this volume, we are acutely

72 Patrick BOUCHERON, *Ce que peut l'histoire* (Leçons inaugurales du Collège de France 259), Paris 2016, p. 69: "Nous avons besoin d'histoire car il nous faut du repos." ("We need history, because we need rest.")

73 On this topic, see the volume by CHAZELLE / DOUBLEDAY / LIFSHITZ / REMENSNYDER (note 26).

74 For a selection of pertinent contributions see above, note 3, 21, and 50.

75 One might cite the efforts of Columba STEWART, OSB (Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota) to save manuscripts in and from conflict zones: Matteo FAGOTTO, *The Monk Who Saves Manuscripts from ISIS. Why a Christian Wants to Rescue Islamic Artifacts*, in: *The Atlantic* (23 February 2017), online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/the-monk-who-saves-manuscripts-from-isis/517611/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). The project "Pre-modern Manuscripts and Early Books in Conflict Zones" has been awarded the CARMEN Project-prize in 2018, online: <http://www.carmen-medieval.net/project-prize/> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

76 For one aspect of these debates, concerning race and its impact on the North American academy in particular, see a statement by the group *Medievalists of Color*, online: <http://medievalistsofcolor.com/statements/on-race-and-medieval-studies/> (last accessed 15/05/2019). For brief comments on the influence of lived experience on the construction of the subjects of scientific inquiry in this context see Geraldine HENG, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 1–5.

77 See above, note 13.

aware of all these lacunae, and it is not least due to this awareness that we consider this volume primarily to be an attempt to encourage further debate.

Our project has a relatively limited objective: to present a representative sample of some of what we consider to be the more important ways in which Medieval Studies can contribute to advancing our understanding of important social and scientific questions. It, inevitably, involves a degree of subjective judgement about what should be considered ‘important’. We have, in some instances, excluded proposals – occasionally even whole essays – not because they were intrinsically uninteresting, but because they did not speak to what we consider to be the core themes of the volume. The most vociferous objection of reviewers may remain our decision to exclude medievalism.

While we fully embrace the importance and dynamism of medievalism as a field, we do not share the opinion put forward by Tommaso DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, who identified it as the most important arena for the future of Medieval Studies.⁷⁸ To the contrary, we believe that experts in medievalism need a different set of instruments to do their important work to those employed by medievalists. Transforming Medieval Studies into studies of medievalism would, from a certain point of view, amount to nothing less than the abolition of the former – and this is something we would like to avoid. This book is a manifesto for something quite different: it is the case for the value of the study of the Middle Ages in and of *themselves* and what such doubtless esoteric pursuits may still tell us about the world in which we live. In keeping with the dictum of the modern discipline of History’s founding father, we submit it remains worthwhile to focus on “what actually happened”, even if we remain conscious that we will never be in a position to give an entirely satisfactory answer. While we would agree with VON RANKE that our task is not to seek to judge the past or “instruct” the present, where we would depart from his view is that we remain convinced that the contemporary world can be *informed* by study of the Middle Ages, and that such study may benefit the future.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI (note 1), pp. 27, 250–251.

⁷⁹ VON RANKE’s full comment, from which the dictum *wie es eigentlich gewesen* is often extracted, reads, VON RANKE (note 12), p. vii: “Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beygemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloss sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.” (“To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: it wants only to show what actually happened”, transl. Fritz STERN, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, 2nd ed. New York 1973, p. 57.)

