

Book Review

**Gabriele, Matthew & David M. Perry,
*The Bright Ages:
A New History of Medieval Europe*¹**

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The medieval ages have always been cast in a bad light. I would have written “dark light” but that would be oxymoronic. Just the same, the common predilection among the uninitiated is to take “middle ages” and “dark ages” as though they are synonymous or worse, synchronous (that is, they inhabit the same period of time). They tend to unwittingly disregard that the term “dark ages” (an expression credited to the humanist Renaissance poet, Petrarch) refers to the immediate aftermath of the fall of Rome and the label “middle ages” is a post-medieval coinage used by modern historians (like Leonardo Bruni [15th c.] and Christoph Cellarius [17th c.]) in reference to the long interlude between the antiquity and the modern period. It is difficult to disabuse the popular imagination of the horror, violence, and decadence ascribed to the middle ages due largely to modernist historiography, which propagates the reified notion of what they seem. The recurrent accent given to such horrendous episodes like the crusades, the Inquisition, church scandals and Black Death continuously fortify the belief that the medieval world is nothing but a wasteland. Very little thought is lent to key developments like the formation of cities, the rise of universities, the institution of democratic government, the opening of global trade routes, the flourishing of empirical sciences and the spread of modern logic and mathematics, all of which could be traced back to their medieval roots. This is precisely what the book of Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*, attempts to supply. As indicated by the title, the book aims to render “a new history of medieval Europe.” The “new history” here, however, does not mean a history that hitherto remains untold but simply, a new way of telling and seeing the same history we’ve read and heard time and again. In fact, there is nothing in the book that has not been written about by other medieval historians like John Marenbon,

¹ New York: Harper, 2021, 364 pp., EPUB.

Steven Marrone or Norman Kretzmann. Notwithstanding the familiar content, the reader will likely welcome the different narrating of history afforded by a book, which reads almost like a literary piece in its own right. In this tome, Gabriele and Perry deviated from the usual post-mortem style of history-telling by weaving seemingly disparate, even marginal events, into a narrative that is replete with details but free from that somber and tedious aura of a scholarly work. A case in point is their presentation of the life and exploits of Moses Maimonides,² undoubtedly one of the most significant intellectual figures of the Middle Ages. Rather than merely dishing out the sophisticated details of Maimonides' intellectual oeuvre, Gabriele and Perry framed his biography within the larger context of the Jews' intermingling with the Arabs and Christians of the time and showed how their contact among each other facilitated the free and safe passage of goods and ideas despite the divide between their religions, territories, politics, and worldviews. The result was a surprisingly exciting historical tale that conveys the right information minus the dizzying overload common among the standard medieval chronicles. The same thing may be found in their reportage of the Muslims' conquest of Jerusalem in 638 which—thanks to an agreement forged by Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, and Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem—created a space for both Muslims and Christians to co-exist and inhabit the place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.³ Gabriele and Perry thought it was this kind of benevolent arrangement which made it possible for Islam to expand rapidly and successfully within the Middle Eastern region and beyond. As they explained:

That coexistence was often uneasy and always unequal, but is at least part of the reason that Islam was able to spread so rapidly throughout large chunks of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Indeed, what we see with the arrival of these new believers is more continuity than change. Certainly, the coming of Islam brought subjugation and pressure to convert but also the attraction of intellectual continuity with Rome, and in any case, despite the protestations of certain Christians at the time, nothing approaching an 'abomination of desolation.'⁴

² See Matthew Gabriele & David M. Perry, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper, 2021), EPUB, chapter 11.

³ See *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

Consistent with this corrective approach, Gabriele and Perry should also be commended for providing a more gender-inclusive account of medieval history. This is a far cry from historical accounts which often present medieval events through the lens of male figures like popes, emperors, knights, or clerics. In such recounting, women were often relegated to the role of the anti-hero—like heretics and witches—consigned to be punished and burned at stake. Such one-sided portrayal of history does reinforce and perpetuate the common bias which projects the middle ages as a male dominion. What Gabriele and Perry did was not really to revise history but to write a counter-history by shedding light on individual women whose role and influence were often glossed over or unsung. They did this in their portraits of the likes of Galla Placidia, the influential mother of Emperor Valentinian III of Rome,⁵ the Lombard queen, Theodelinda,⁶ the female characters of *Beowulf*, the leading women of the medieval England,⁷ the miraculous Ste. Foy⁸ and such lesser known but equally significant female personages, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the author of *Guigemar* (an old French story), Marie de France.⁹ As Gabriele and Perry noted: "...women are the skeleton giving this society its shape...The 'Dark Ages' imagines a world of violent men and subservient women, a world that conforms to stereotypes; the Bright Ages, attentive to the sources themselves and not our own preconceptions, finds something much more nuanced."¹⁰

The book did deliver on its title, *The Bright Ages*, by putting the image of light at the front and center of each chapter. Gabriele and Perry achieved this with each chapter developed around the image of light in its multifarious forms. A cursory glance at the titles of the said chapters would bear this out, e.g., "Shimmering Stars on the Adriatic" for Chapter 1, "The Gleaming Tiles of the New Rome" for Chapter 2, "Dawn in Jerusalem" for Chapter 3 and so on and so forth. As they elaborated in an explanatory paragraph:

The Bright Ages contain the beauty and light of stained glass in the high ceilings of the cathedral, the blood and sweat of the people who built them, the golden relics of the Church, the acts of charity and devotion by people of deep faith, but also the wars fought over ideas of the

⁵ See *Ibid.*, chapter 1.

⁶ See *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, chapter 8.

⁹ See *Ibid.*, chapter 12.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

sacred, the scorched flesh of the heretics burned in the name of intolerance and fear. *The Bright Ages* reveal the permeable nature of the interwoven cultures of Europe in the thousand or so years before Dante. *The Bright Ages* looked outward from Europe but were not constrained to Europe. They were aware—as the medievals themselves were—of a much larger, round globe.”¹¹

With this inspiration, they meticulously mapped out the medieval historical landscape in search of the best, or should I say, brightest way of disclosing the rays of light which illumine the panorama of what they counted as “the bright ages.” They made sure readers won’t miss the luminous effect of light in its natural form (as in the case of the 8th-century British kingdom of Northumbria in chapter 5) or in its spiritual sense (as in the glorious city of Jerusalem in chapter 9) or in its intellectual expression (as in the depiction of the legacy of Moses Maimonides in chapter 11) or in its architectural manifestation (as in the marvelous stained glasses of the cathedral of Notre Dame in chapter 14). The best depiction of light is reserved in chapters 1 and 17, the opening and closing chapters respectively, where Gabriele and Perry glance back at Ravenna, the location they choose to introduce and conclude their chronicle of the Middle Ages as an illumined epoch. The eastern coastal area of Ravenna is the place that connects Chapters 1 and 17 being the site identified with Galla Placidia’s chapel, famous for its mosaic starry ceilings, and the final days of the Florentine poet, Dante. Galla Placidia and Dante are the alpha and omega of the Middle Ages. Galla Placidia was one of the last witnesses of the glory that was Rome; it was she who, through her imperial persuasion, sought to erect a memorial (the chapel and its luminous mosaics) to immortalize its illustrious memory. Dante, on the other hand, was one of the last figures who watched the Middle Ages in its passing; his death marked the crossing of the medieval times into Renaissance. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is hailed by Gabriele and Perry as the ultimate medieval testament to light. In their words:

The *Divine Comedy* as a whole drives toward the luce eterna (“eternal light”)... The *Inferno* begins with Dante in total darkness...The *Purgatorio* concludes with Dante cleansed, reborn, and ready for Heaven...And then, finally, at the end of the *Paradiso*, Dante returns to earth, having seen the eternal light, his ‘instinct and intellect

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 1.

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balanced equally . . . by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.’¹²

Readers searching for an alternative account of medieval history will definitely find *The Bright Ages* a delight. That it is able to relate this in a manner that combines both scholarship and literary flourish is yet another reason why this book qualifies as a must-read.

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Reference

Gabriele, Matthew & David M. Perry, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper, 2021), EPUB.

¹² *Ibid.*, chapter 17.