

Turning to Another Possible Medieval Millennium

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Once we've performed the "global turn," which direction should we be looking? Unlike, for example, the "material," "linguistic," or "gender" turns, the "global" doesn't come with a proposed empirical focus, mode of analysis, or epistemological-methodological worldview. Scholars might *propose* any number of focuses, perspectives, and methodologies, but the global turn doesn't *arrive* with any as such—hence the many publications, conferences, and projects seeking to "define," "frame," and move "towards" a "global" [*insert historiographical keyword here*].¹

The reason for this lack of specific approach, focus, or methodology is straightforward: the global turn is an almost one-to-one reflection of our own historical moment. The last three decades since the end of the Cold War have witnessed an inflection point in planetary space-time compression, the processes of political and economic integration, and the concomitant increase in connectivity and mobility, referred to as "globalization." While the high watermark of the "End of History" has receded since the financial crash of 2008 and subsequent political developments, these processes have themselves compounded the other fundament of our historical moment: the end of Euro-American hegemony, or at least the certainty of it, and the rise of political and economic "multipolarity," even potentially a new planetary hegemon in the shape of the People's Republic of China. The global turn is, then, the sometimes conscious, sometimes subconsciously channeled historiographical reflection of this moment's unprecedented planetary interconnection and communicative immediacy on the one hand, and the epochal unanchoring of political and economic gravity from "the West" on the other.

The global turn isn't unique in forming a historiographical reflection of wider developments in its historical moment: the gender turn formed the academic echo of the Women's and LGBTQ+ liberation movements, the cultural turn emerged from the concerns of the New Left in concert with neoliberal de-industrialization and offshoring, and intersected with linguistic and narrative turns that tracked an emerging "post" modernity. But the global turn's unique lack of specification in material, analysis, and worldview makes

1. See most relevantly here: Robert I. Moore, "A Global Middle Ages?," in *The Prospect of Global History*, ed. James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, 80–92 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, "Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages," *Past & Present* 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 1–44; Bryan C. Keene, ed., *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World through Illuminated Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019).

it uniquely ill-equipped to comprehend the problematics that, implicitly or explicitly, it has emerged to address—issues like the legacies of Eurocentrism, both in the plot points and detail of the history we write and in our analytical assumptions, or the necessity of moving beyond preconceived units of analysis, whether termed cultures, civilizations, countries/nations, or regions. Coming on the heels of a historiographical moment dominated by critical reactions *against* grand narrative, much global history continues to instinctively reject any implication of teleology—resulting in, among other things, a curious relationship, or lack thereof, with the “world” history movement of the 1960s to 1990s.² Of course, the critique of teleology, as part of a wider disavowal of the reified grand narratives of high modernism, whether liberal, nationalist, or Orthodox Marxist, and not least the Eurocentrism essential to all varieties, was a crucial historiographical development and remains so. But we require stories nonetheless, multiple, yes, and able to comprehend the varying scales at which History happens, but no less grand for all that.

These problems inherent to all global history feel particularly acute for those researching and writing about the Afro-Eurasian “Old World” in the medieval millennium, roughly 500 to 1500 CE. Applied to the eastern hemisphere alone “global” seems contradictory or misleading,³ while a supposedly “middle” age is defined by the Eurocentric scheme of a “lost” Antiquity “reborn” in Early Modernity. On the first, the problem is more apparent than real; in contrast to some proponents of “world” and “big” history,⁴ no one in the recent global turn is proposing a comprehensive account of the entire planet’s past, present, and future. Most self-consciously global history focused on the last two to five centuries only deals with a few interconnected regions or continents relevant to the particular story the scholars in question hope to tell—so just as “limited,” and just as vast, as anything possible in the eastern hemisphere between 500 and 1500. The consensus for modernists, then, is that to be “global” is to tell as big and as connected a story as necessary, without respect for apparent boundaries, disciplinary, political, or otherwise,⁵ “to seek knowledge even as far as China,” in the words of the hadith, rather than to write a history of everything.

The second is a potentially more serious problem. If one of the fundamental aims of the global turn is overcoming Eurocentrism in its manifold manifestations, then, on the face of it, extending an explicitly Eurocentric periodization across the entire Afro-Eurasian landmass is an odd move. At this point, therefore, it’s important to take a step back and not get caught in a definition trap. If it’s accepted that the global turn is, at least in origin, less a movement than a conjuncturally-derived awareness that things must be done differently, and so that the terms have been likewise set by the historical moment rather than a process of critical reflection, then it doesn’t make much sense to agonize over them. Which is to say, medievalists don’t need to use “global” as a category of analysis; we can prefer “Afro-

2. Cf. Jerry H. Bentley, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. Cf. A. J. West, “The Hemispheric Middle Ages - Part I,” *Medium* (2019); idem, “The Hemispheric Middle Ages - Part II,” *Medium* (2021); and Nora Berend, “Interconnection and Separation: Medieval Perspectives on the Modern Problem of the ‘Global Middle Ages’”, *Medieval Encounters* 29 (2023): 285-314

4. Cf. the “[Big History Project](#).”

5. Cf. Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Eurasian,” “hemispheric,” some description of process like “connected,” “transregional,” or, if we do want to provoke and evoke implicit expansionary, integrative tendencies in whatever phenomenon we analyze, then “globalizing” and “globalized.” The point is less what “global history” *is* than what we want to *do* with the opportunity that the global turn provides: a vehicle for breaking down reified conceptual and disciplinary boundaries.

To take an example from my own research, Armenians were part of broader “worlds” throughout the medieval millennium, but in disciplinary terms only the fields of Late Antiquity, Medieval Anatolia, and, to a lesser degree, Byzantine and Crusade Studies, have integrated Armenian sources, stories and specialists centrally to their makeup.⁶ The glaring absence is Islamic Studies writ large, where, a few bright lights and promising early career scholars notwithstanding,⁷ Armenian sources and stories largely remain notable by their absence. They are thus orphaned from their historical conditions, reduced to national-cultural particularity. So, for example, a twelfth-century geography-cum-itinerary describing cities from the Hindu Kush, through the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean to Southeast and East Asia, is left as a seeming unicum, rather than a uniquely surviving witness to Armenophone participation in a multilingual, multi-faith Islamicate discourse of place.⁸ And the direction of travel goes both ways. While specialists of the Mongol world-empire have long used Armenian histories for their rich evidence on the terminology and practice of Chinggisid statecraft, especially concerning taxation, Armenian specialists have been less active in the dramatic transformation of Mongol Studies over the last three decades.⁹ The result is that, on the one hand, Mongol specialists are unaware of unique survivals in Armenian such as inscribed documents from the Ilkhanid state *diwan*,¹⁰ while Armenian specialists are hamstrung in providing holistic analysis of sources whose best cognates are found in the West Eurasian Jochid, Central Asian Chaghataid, and East Asian Yuan states.

The global turn is, then, a vehicle for telling integrated stories of sources currently siloed in various religio-culturally-, civilizationally-, and nationally-defined fields, without seeking to implicitly reduce one to the other—so that, for example, Armenian sources “become” Islamic, reduced to a disciplinary essence implicitly assumed to be Arabophone and, to a much lesser degree, Persophone. The problematic then becomes: what integrated stories *do* we want to tell? While the two main proposals for the shape of a Global Middle

6. Cf. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); A. C. S. Peacock, Bruno De Nicola, and Sara Nur Yıldız, eds., *Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia* (London: Ashgate, 2015); and Patricia Blessing and Rachel Goshgarian, eds., *Architecture and Landscape in Medieval Anatolia, 1000–1500* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

7. See especially Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

8. Vladimir Braginsky, “Two Eastern Christian Sources on Medieval Nusantara,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154 (1998): 367–96.

9. One notable exception is Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220–1335)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

10. Hovhannes A. Orbeli, ed., *Corpus Inscriptionum Armenicarum*, vol. I (Yerevan, 1966), 19, 22–24, and 26–28.

Ages so far, led by Geraldine Heng on the one hand and Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen on the other, differ in key aspects, they are broadly united in rejecting any overall story for the medieval millennium. Heng's iteration is more emphatic, explicitly arguing against the application of "globalization" as a term, and the conceptual apparatus of World-Systems Analysis, as anachronistic and teleological grand narratives, in the latter case conditioned by a "Marxian residue" to privilege the economic.¹¹ Instead she prefers the idea of "early globalisms," asserting their "variety" and "specific character" that produce "recurrences-with-difference across macrohistorical time," a perspective that "works by building up evidence from traces, fragments, and clues in surviving documents and artifacts to piece together global interconnections [and] stands as a resonant alternative to the schematics of macrostructural *grandrécit* historiography in retrieving a variegated world of interrelationships whose fine-grained complexity, intricacy, and density of detail is not overlooked."¹² Holmes and Standen, conversely, leave the door open to grand narrative at some later stage in the collective working out of the Global Middle Ages paradigm, but, exactly as Heng, "offer a challenge to the dominant economic and geopolitical paradigm of global history, with its teleological view of the relentless development of a global order defined by the ever-increasing circulation of people, goods and capital; that is, by 'globalization.'"¹³ At the same time, however, they offer what they term a "working hypothesis" grounded in the general thickening of connectivity over the medieval millennium, broadly endorsing R. I. Moore's concept of the "Great Intensification": "a period characterized by increased economic activity, urbanization, social restructuring, multi-centred politics and new frameworks of ideas."¹⁴

So both proposals for the global medieval paradigm exhibit strong hangovers from the narrative, linguistic, and cultural turns, albeit Heng's much more emphatically so—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that her training, specialization, and career have all been in literature departments. And there *are* crucial lessons to preserve from these historiographical moments, in particular attention to the human scale of History, critiques of functionalist, reductive, and determinist economism, and awareness of the multiplicity of possible narratives, with none emergent readymade from The Past itself. But both proposals seem unduly limited, empirically and conceptually. How else can we comprehend the lived experience of an enslaved woman from the Malabar Coast, manumitted for marriage to a Jewish merchant originally from Tunis, moving to end her days in Cairo-Fustat, than by operating with micro-, meso-, *and* macro-structural perspectives?¹⁵ Similarly, while the texture of everyday life is infinitely richer than a functional, reductive determination by the economic, the systemic and systematic exploitation of productive and reproductive

11. Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 52.

12. Heng, *Global*, 47, 53.

13. Holmes and Standen, "Introduction," 2.

14. Holmes and Standen, "Introduction," 36–38.

15. Cf. Elizabeth A. Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

labor dictates certain fundamental rhythms through which social orders have become “stuck”¹⁶ in class societies, to borrow David Graeber and David Wengrow’s term—a “Marxian residue” which I am quite happy to own. Maybe most importantly, while much global history presents itself as politically neutral, along with perhaps most historiography in general, there are certain implicit and explicit political aims that must likewise be owned. What else is the move beyond preconceived cultural boundaries than an implicit critique of the nation-state; or a critique of Eurocentrism than a critique of Western imperialism? And, maybe most pressingly, *without* attempting to construct bigger stories we risk the global turn devolving into a fetish of connectivity and mobility. These might be useful themes for identifying phenomena in need of explanation, but they’re not explanatory concepts in themselves, and risk uncritically celebrating apparent precursors of recent neoliberal globalization, with all the erasure of the hyper-exploitation of the Global South that that entails.

At its base, where one falls in the debate over alternative stories encompassing the period depends on how one understands the medieval millennium: is this a purely arbitrary era grounded in older Eurocentric narratives, or, coincidentally or otherwise, did those narratives happen upon the specifically “European” trajectory within a wider set of integrated Afro-Eurasian developments? I’d argue for the latter. While rhythmical, patterned interconnections between the different regions and continents of Afro-Eurasia reached an inflection point in the later First Millennium BCE, and tended towards thickening from then until the fifth century CE, it is between 500 and 1500 that a true ecumene came to encompass much of the landmass.¹⁷ Likewise, while Antiquity and earlier millennia saw sometimes remarkably high levels of commercialization, including of agriculture and other forms of production, it was after 700 that capital accumulation became relatively autonomous from large empires, and by the end of the period it was far more common for subaltern classes to experience some kind of mercantile subordination in the organization of their everyday lives, social reproduction, and productive activity than at any other time previously.¹⁸

And, maybe most importantly, it was the majority of the landmass beyond the European peninsula that showed these trends earliest, and exhibited their fullest development by the end of the period, especially in the Islamicate world that developed out of the imperial Caliphate, and the Sinosphere constructed by and around the states of the Chinese imperial

16. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

17. Cf. Philippe Beaujard, *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean: A Global History*, vol. 2, *From the Seventh Century to the Fifteenth Century CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

18. Cf. Jairus Banaji, “Islam, the Mediterranean and the Rise of Capitalism,” *Historical Materialism* 15, no. 1 (2007): 47–74; idem, *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020); Lorenzo M. Bondioli, “Peasants, Merchants, and Caliphs: Capital and Empire in Fatimid Egypt” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2021); idem, “Towards a Longer History of Commercial Capital,” *Storica*, 28, no. 83/84 (2022): 177–94; idem, “Islam, Merchants, and Capitalism: Fifty-Five Years in the Socioeconomic History of the Medieval Islamic World,” *Capitalism* 4, no. 2 (2023): 259–307; and Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 208–94.

tradition.¹⁹ Likewise, the nomadic states of Central Eurasia played a fundamental role in weaving these political and economic cores into an Afro-Eurasian whole, especially after the concurrent fall of the Tang state and transformation of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁰ Which is to say, by adopting an initially Eurocentric periodization for the landmass, we open a route to provincialize the traditional story of the Eurasian Far West and demonstrate its dependency on processes that amount to the formation of the “Old World” in the medieval millennium—a story that makes sense of the desperation with which Europeans in the later fifteenth century sought direct access to the richest areas of Afro-Eurasia, the “Islamicate lake” of the Indian Ocean, and the hemisphere’s most productive, commercialized regions in East Asia.

So I’d propose that the global turn offers the possibility to construct a radically new field—in the strict sense of transformation *from the root*—covering the millennium lasting *circa* 500 to 1500. At its largest, this would be the Afro-Eurasian Middle Ages, and encompass within itself regional, linguistic, and material specializations as technical skills to be acquired, but not disciplinary fields to be “mastered” with boundaries in need of defence. It would preserve the best of older “world” history by explicitly tackling macro questions and seeking to construct macro narratives, while incorporating the crucial attention to scale achieved in more recent historiography—a perspective where we can imagine the collective agency of subaltern actors who might never move more than 100 km from their place of birth, and only rarely meet religious or cultural “others,” as a kind of dark matter structuring the “mobile,” “connective” phenomena so beloved of global historians. We must critically imagine worlds in which the lived experience of porcelain workers in Jingdezhen was dependent on market demand in Cairo-Fustat and Baghdad, or where the largely invisibilized resistance of subaltern classes subject to both traditional Islamicate and newly imposed Mongol taxes fundamentally contributed to the terminal crisis of the Chinggisid world-order in the fourteenth century. The conceptual apparatus of World-Systems Analysis should prove essential in the endeavor, critiqued and renovated wherever necessary, but not the proverbial baby to be thrown out with the bathwater. It would be, in a sense, unashamedly presentist, but rather than seeking to justify the present on the basis of the past in classic Eurocentric manner, it would highlight the contingencies and roads untraveled in each development examined and narrative constructed. And thereby the potential inherent in the global turn for another possible medieval millennium might just contribute to the pressing need in our own moment to struggle for another possible world.

19. See note 18.

20. Cf. Dilnoza Duturaeva, *Qarakhanid Roads to China: A History of Sino-Turkic Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).