

The Global Middle Ages between Empire and Neoliberalism

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In a comic retelling of the Arthurian tales, the knights assemble at the Round Table to discuss the quest for the Holy Grail. However, “not one of those knights was certain in his heart what a grail was, save that it was Holy and the object of Quests.” Each nodded profoundly every time it was mentioned, but posed sly questions to the group that might induce others to reveal its nature.¹ Roundtable discussions among historians of the Global Middle Ages have something of this quality, as it is a highly complex and recent approach whose goals, methods, and scope are still up in the air. I do not have the answers, nor do I consider myself a scholar of the Global Middle Ages. Instead, I offer the present contribution as a historian of east Rome (also known as Byzantium), a field with a historically uneasy relationship to all things “medieval,” whether western or global.

In my effort to understand the Global Middle Ages, I distinguish it from global histories of the Middle Ages. There is, to be sure, considerable overlap and convergence between the two, especially in the attempt to be inclusive and expand the category of the Middle Ages from the narrow corner of northwestern Europe to which it is currently confined by the vast majority of practicing medievalists. Yet the first—the Global Middle Ages—is thematically focused on connections among different cultures or regions of the medieval world and the rise of “globalization” via these interactions, whereas the second is literally an attempt to write a global history of the period without necessarily foregrounding connectivity. The first can be done in brief monographs or essays, whereas the second usually results in huge tomes whose components do not—in fact, cannot—always interact.²

Global history is sometimes presented as a new and challenging attempt to practice the late modern virtue of inclusivity, break away from the chauvinism of western-oriented approaches, and restore the historical presence of marginalized groups. It can certainly be done in these ways, but global history is in fact ancient and linked to “global” empires. Herodotos’ global ethnography (fifth century BC) was a response to the rise of the Persian

1. N. Seare, *Rude Tales and Glorious: A Retelling of the Arthurian Tales* (New York: Potter Inc., 1983) 94–95.

2. Compare, for instance, G. Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), and V. Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), with D. G. König, ed., *Geschichte der Welte: 600-1350, Geteilte Welten* (Munich: Beck and Harvard University Press, 2023), and M. Borgolte, *Die Welten des Mittelalters: Globalgeschichte eines Jahrtausends* (Munich: Beck, 2022).

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empire. When Polybios (second century BC) first articulated a theory of global history it was in direct response to the rise of Rome. “Before that time,” he said, “events all across the *oikoumene* [the known world] had been scattered and dispersed... but from then on history became, as it were, one composite body, with events in Italy and Africa intertwining with those of Asia and Greece, all leading toward one end.”³ Polybios presented his model of ecumenical history as an innovation. It was also focused on connectivity, through Rome, though he clarified elsewhere that he meant only the καθ’ ἡμᾶς οἰκουμένη, i.e., “our *oikoumene*,” “our side of the *oikoumene*,” “the *oikoumene* that pertains to us.”⁴

At its peak, the Roman empire contained approximately a quarter of the total human population, so histories of Rome were in their own way “global” too. Imperial views of “the inhabited world,” sometimes depicted as a globe grasped by the emperors, were similarly qualified: for practical purposes, the world simply *was* the empire of the Romans.⁵ In scientific writings the *oikoumene* could refer to the entire globe, but in most political contexts it was only the καθ’ ἡμᾶς οἰκουμένη, that is, the Roman polity, that mattered for as long as Constantinople was in Roman hands.⁶ When it fell, ecumenical historiography had to be rebooted. An Athenian named Laonikos Chalkokondyles recounted the rise of the Ottoman empire by situating it within an expansive vista that spanned from Britain to Central Asia.⁷

Global approaches are old even within European historiography and are usually linked to empire. One of the greatest global medieval histories was that of Edward Gibbon, who also chose the history of Rome, especially east Rome, to be the connecting thread of his narrative, which ranged from western Europe to the world of Islam and Central Asia. The empire of Constantinople provided him with a useful vantage point from which to cast his gaze east and west, back to antiquity and forward to modern Europe. The most spectacular global medieval history of the eighteenth century was probably Voltaire’s *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (1756). One of its ethical goals was not dissimilar to that of many modern historians, namely to destabilize Eurocentrism and notions of European supremacy and superiority. To this end, Voltaire praises India and China and mocks European Christian pretensions at precisely the time when the Europeans were establishing unprecedented dominion over the globe and touting their moral superiority.

It is striking that Gibbon and Voltaire, who were both engaged in projects of global medieval research, are absent from discussions about the Global Middle Ages. Perhaps their strident projection of Enlightenment values is itself seen as a form of Eurocentrism, even though those values were mostly counter-hegemonic at the time. Western academia

3. Polybios, *Histories*, 1.3.3-4 (my translation).

4. Polybios, *Histories*, 3.37.1, 3.58.2, 4.38.1.

5. C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 320–35.

6. A. Kaldellis, “Did the Byzantine Empire have ‘Ecumenical’ or ‘Universal’ Aspirations?,” in *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power: Europe, Asia, and America*, ed. C. Ando and S. Richardson, 272–300 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

7. A. Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

is currently squeamish about the Enlightenment, yet modern inclusivity is perhaps not all that different in its overall approach. It too wants to problematize European supremacy and promote the values espoused by professional scholars in western countries, even (or especially) when those values clash with powerful reactionary ideologies in their own societies. Programmatic statements about the Global Middle Ages bear the unmistakable imprint of the values of the early twenty-first-century professoriate, no less than Voltaire and Gibbon's histories did theirs in the eighteenth.

The Global Middle Ages proper (GMA) can, in theory, take a number of different approaches, ranging from the study of cultural contact and long-distance trade to the comparison of societies that were not in contact with each other and the study of common developments affecting distant societies. These approaches can foster academic communities among scholars whose home-fields are too small for the conversations that they need to have or who need to have conversations on trans-regional themes, which require analytical tools that individual fields rarely develop on their own. Yet overwhelmingly GMA converges around "connectivity" and "globalization" as a function of "interconnectedness." These words are used a *lot* in GMA scholarship, almost as qualifications for entry into the discussion. The processes behind them are valorized, even "celebrated," especially peaceful contact between members of different religious and racial groups. So is "breaking down barriers," not only between modern academic fields but between medieval societies. Emphasis is placed on the movement of peoples, the weakness of medieval states, the "permeability" of their borders, and their inability to hinder globalizing trends. In many ways, this too reflects the politics, predicaments, and preoccupations of the professoriate in the early twenty-first century.

The overuse of these key terms will lead to saturation and eye-rolling, if it has not already, as has happened in Mediterranean Studies. But we should not miss the crucial methodological implications of the emphasis on connectivity, which has already pushed medieval Mediterranean studies to become "the Mediterranean of Relations,"⁸ focusing on "contacts" among religious groups. This has a built-in politics of inclusion and exclusion: if you work on east Rome or Fatimid Egypt, you are not necessarily a historian of "the medieval Mediterranean." But if you work on Christian-Muslim relations, you are. Coasts are privileged over the hinterland and religions over other identities. The litmus test is "connections," especially peaceful connections between religious and racial groups that are of interest to western academics, or slavery. By comparison, Bulgar-Avar or east Roman-Georgian "connections" are a harder sell.

The Holy Grail of the GMA is "globalization." Yet the threshold for it is unclear. Arguments for when the world (or just the eastern Mediterranean) became "truly" globalized have been made in favor of the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Roman era, the year 1000, the High Middle Ages, and, of course, the early modern period after 1492.⁹ I suspect that none of

8. R. Rouighi, "A Mediterranean of Relations for the Medieval Maghrib: Historiography in Question," *Al-Masāq* 29 (2017): 1-20.

9. For one such argument, unusual for providing explicit standards, see T. Hodos, *The Archaeology of the Mediterranean Iron Age: A Globalising World, c.1100-600 BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

these arguments will persuade historians of the modern period that the premodern world was truly globalized in terms of the volume, density, and distances across which exchange and communication took place. Some arguments for medieval globalization (by prominent historians) rely on thin or anecdotal evidence to make big claims, though some regions, especially in Central Asia, appear to have been more interconnected than others.¹⁰ Even so, we rarely find genuinely long-distance exchange, especially in bulk; instead, it's mostly a sequence of local networks with individually narrow horizons that, contingently strung together, produced that effect.

GMA approaches are definitely interesting and need to be pushed to the limits of their explanatory capacity. However, regarding the society that I study—east Rome—I doubt they will add much to what we already know.¹¹ “Influences” (in either direction) have already been mapped out, while most of the east Roman economy, institutions, culture, religion, and intellectual life were not shaped to a significant degree by globalizing connectivity. Constantinople was situated in a global context mostly through war and diplomacy, but those traditional areas of research are not what GMA is all about. Moreover, the “medieval” rubric that is lodged at the heart of GMA may prove to be a hindrance here, as it enshrines a western European view of history that has traditionally excluded the possibility of a Rome in the east, requiring it to take on other guises to even be visible to western historians, first as “the empire of the Greeks” and then “Byzantium.” GMA will also not be able to “see” Romanía—the real name of the east Roman state—if it clings to the axiom that the medieval era began with “the collapse of the Roman empire” around 500 AD.¹²

Be that as it may, unlike global history GMA is definitely a new approach, especially its focus on inter-regional connectivity and the flow of goods and culture above and beyond the history of the states in which they were produced. In the past, global approaches to history tended to focus on so-called “global” empires, but GMA eschews the convenience of a state-centered analytical framework. It seeks out processes of interconnectivity that were not bound to particular societies and focuses on the transcultural exchange of goods, deprioritizing the local history of particular states. In this respect, perhaps, it reflects the neoliberal order under which we now live. Just as global history was enabled by empire, GMA reflects a hegemonic order that prizes the flow of goods and capital across borders and that harbors deep suspicion of the state, even while it requires states in order to stay in power. I will conclude this paper by drawing out this isomorphism between GMA and neoliberalism, in the hope of diagnosing how our own historical positioning shapes our analytical models, though such diagnoses are inherently risky and fallible.

Neoliberalism is a school of economic thought that emerged in Europe and the US during the breakup of the colonial empires. It sought to enshrine the hegemony of property rights and the ability of capital to move freely and globally across borders above any other

10. E.g., a number of the chapters in Hansen, *The Year 1000*.

11. The papers in L. Brubaker, R. Darley, and D. Reynolds, eds., *Global Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 2023), are interesting but tend to redescribe known material in the language of GMA.

12. Heng, *Global Middle Ages*, 23. Heng never mentions Byzantium (by any name) in this programmatic publication.

consideration, including democracy or the ability of sovereign nations to set their own economic agenda. To entrench this hegemony, neoliberalism devised a set of institutions that protected the rights of investors over those of citizens and states.¹³ Like GMA, it tends to disdain states and borders and prizes “connectivity” and the unfettered flow of goods, capital, and information; it is divided, however, about the free movement of peoples. This is the institutional framework of the globalization regime under which we live today. It is, in a sense, a successor form of western hegemony. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, globalization was achieved through colonial empires. Once those were retired, its life was extended via property rights and capital flows, which tilted the playing field in favor of those who had already amassed capital through colonial empires.

Advocates for GMA view globalization positively, as something “seductive” to be celebrated, simply on account of “interconnectedness,” which is taken as a good in itself.¹⁴ This is precisely how the most recent phase of globalization was hyped in the west and sold to us by the PR-wings of the neoliberal movement. It was supposedly all about breaking down barriers, bringing people together, and “connectivity.” We were supposed to look at culture and not the money trail. But in the country where I grew up, or at least among the communists in my extended family, globalization was regarded as a menace: it consisted of the mechanisms by which foreign banks extracted rents from poorer countries and investors extracted resources, with the rules tilted in favor of capital concentrations. It was empire prolonged by other means. The experience of the economic crisis after 2008 did not prove them wrong.

There is a warning in this isomorphism. Like any analytical model, GMA will emphasize some features of the historical record at the expense of others and require entrants to play by its own rules. Whenever my field, Byzantine Studies, has engaged in dialogue with its western medieval counterpart, this has always taken place on western terms, using concepts that western medievalists understand and prioritize. It is others who have to adapt to them. GMA now wants to prioritize connections and commonalities. Will those too be identified based on the current ideological needs of scholars working in western, largely Anglophone, traditions? There is a risk that GMA will reproduce the extractive dynamics of its neoliberal counterpart, forcing smaller fields—and the particular states, societies, and cultures that they represent—to export scholarship on the terms required by globalization and connectivity. If a field has little to offer in this regard, it will be left to wither, or else it will have to change its modes of production to supply goods to the GMA academic market. Let me flip this thought-experiment around. If our current order comes to be seen in a less positive light—say, through the rise of local sourcing, short supply chains, and prioritizing domestic needs over unfettered capital flows—will the appeal of GMA also wane?

13. Q. Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

14. Heng, *Global Middle Ages*, 33–34. Heng sees modern globalization as primarily technological with “economic, social, political, and cultural” aspects (38). I see it as primarily economic.