

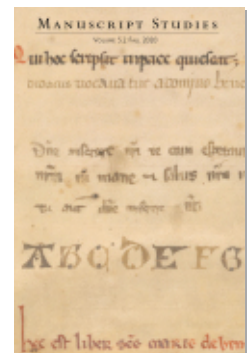


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*Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through
Illuminated Manuscripts* ed. by Bryan C. Keene (review)

Valerie Hansen

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REVIEWS

Bryan C. Keene, ed. *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019. 296 pp., 176 color illustrations. \$60. ISBN: 978-1-60606-598-3.

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THE TERM “GLOBAL MIDDLE AGES” captures the desire of many medievalists to make their field less Eurocentric. Bryan C. Keene is far more than the editor of this important volume: he has written the introduction, one of its twenty-two essays, and the introductory essays to the book’s four sections on mapping, books and related objects, illustrations of identity, and movement of manuscripts. He explains the point of the book: “Through essays and case studies, the authors have expanded the often Eurocentric historiography, chronology, and geography of this vast field of study to include objects, individuals, narratives, and materials from Africa, Asia, and the Americas” (4). The book also seeks to “interrogate the terms ‘medieval’ (or ‘Middle Ages’), ‘global,’ and ‘book(s)’” (6).

The volume is particularly strong on reconceptualizing “book(s).” Far more manuscripts survive from Europe than from any other part of the world, with the possible exception of China. Some of the losses stem from climate (such as in India and Southeast Asia), and some are the product of colonial occupation (as in the Spanish destruction of almost all pre-conquest texts). One can compensate for the lack of material outside Europe by expanding the definition of books: Byron Ellsworth Hamann uses M. T. Clanchy’s definition of “memory-retaining objects,” which extend beyond books to include “bones of the saints encased in gold, Gospel books studded with gems, charters and seals wrapped in Asiatic silks, finger rings, knives symbolizing conveyances,

and so on” (73). As Hamann explains, only four Maya codices from before 1500 are known today, but his examination of post-1500 materials shows that Maya artists produced chronicles, genealogies, and maps—none of which survive. Megan E. O’Neil elegantly reads a series of Maya pottery vessels as “memory-retaining objects,” showing how closely one group of ceramics mimics books by duplicating their layout and multiple motifs.

Books offer one way to define the Middle Ages: before the 1450s, people produced manuscripts; afterwards, printed books. Another way to justify the chronology is events: from the end of the classical era in Rome to the early modern era, or 500 to 1500. A Christian view would see the Middle Ages as starting from Augustine and running to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Suzanne Conklin Akbari astutely points out the limitations of such a framework: “Through this periodization, West is opposed to East, Christendom to the world of Islam, Europe to Asia” (82). It is worth remembering that Europeans themselves came up with this chronology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and many have since criticized it. In an oft-cited essay, Alexander Murray asks, “Should the Middle Ages be abolished?” (in *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 [2004]: 1–22), and concludes that no, the term, problematic as it is, serves a purpose, partially because it has enjoyed such a long use.

One possible way forward is to ask whether analogues to the classical, medieval, and early modern periods exist outside of Europe. Several large societies experienced classic periods, or eras when the first large empires formed at roughly the same time as in Rome: consider China (the Qin and Han dynasties), India (the Mauryan dynasty), and Mesoamerica (Teotihuacan). In the 1940s and 1950s, scholars of the Maya adopted the label “Classic” for the period between 200 BCE and 800 CE and “Post-Classic” for the succeeding centuries, as Byron Ellsworth Hamann explains (72); we do not know how the Maya viewed their past. One could cite other examples, but the point is clear: if we want to apply the term “Middle Ages” to non-European societies, it is certainly worth considering how other peoples conceived of and measured time and how modern scholars divide the past of the societies they study into different eras.

The world’s societies may have begun to walk together in the year 500—recent studies of late antiquity across Eurasia have raised this possibility, certainly a research question worth pursuing—and multiple societies begin

to converge in the year 1000 as a system of new pathways formed around the world and connected regions previously not in contact. That is the contention of my *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020). And by 1500, when the European voyagers circumnavigated the globe, the entire world definitely entered a new phase, so even if the start date of 500 has limited resonance in a given society, the end date of 1500 certainly had repercussions all over the globe.

Things began to change in Europe after 1300, as we can see from multiple manuscripts made at that time that depict objects and people from much farther away than earlier manuscripts. A 1330s manuscript of the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) from Iran (probably Tabriz) shows Alexander the Great meeting with the Queen of Andalus in the Iberian Peninsula on one page and with a group of Brahmans in India on another (plate III.5). Similarly, a 1444 manuscript from Shiraz of the *Shahnama* illustrates a banquet with Chinese blue-and-white porcelain vases.

In calling on curators to closely examine the items already in their collections, several authors identify portrayals of non-Europeans in European manuscripts from the 1300s. Mark Cruse's study of the only group of illustrated Marco Polo manuscripts identifies the Italians as key players who introduced images from outside Europe. The manuscript Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 2810, *Le Livre des merveilles du monde* (The Book of the Marvels of the World), is "one of the most impressive examples of the Italian absorption and diffusion of global art ranging from Islamic textiles to Chinese porcelain" (199). The manuscript's illustrations of Chinese paper money do not show it clearly because the artists did not understand what they were portraying. Here, a Chinese depiction of paper money from the Ming dynasty offers an interesting comparison: entitled "Assembly of forlorn souls or sold and pawned bondmaids, and abandoned wives of former times," in a set of 139 paintings from the Baoning monastery and now held in the Shanxi Museum, the scroll shows a man counting out bills of paper money to purchase a slave. (See Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, eds., *The BP Exhibition: Ming, 50 Years That Changed China* [London: The British Museum, 2014], 252.)

We would expect a manuscript of Polo to show places beyond Europe. More surprising is Pamela A. Patton's study of the manuscript *Fuéros de*

Aragón (Feudal Customs of Aragón) produced in northeastern Spain in 1300. Examining the people portrayed in the initials at the start of several sections, she identifies stereotypes of both Jews and Muslims. Even though the Muslims in Spain were from North Africa or the Arabian Peninsula and “light or medium complexioned,” the manuscript depicts a Muslim as having “deep brown skin and curly hair,” as if from sub-Saharan Africa (186–87). Patton suggests that the manuscript is drawing on the stock portrayal of Ethiopians as having “black, brown, or occasionally blue skin,” a stereotyped portrayal already common throughout Europe at this time.

The former director of the Getty, James Cuno, has the last word; he defends institutions like the Getty because only they have collections deep enough to allow scholars to demonstrate the extent of pre-1500 connections. Point taken. But consider how many of the world’s non-European masterpieces are held in either American or European collections. In 1868 the British army took several hundred Ethiopian manuscripts to Europe, leaving very few behind (91). And only one of the four pre-1500 Maya codices is in Mexico. Might there be a creative way to return some of those materials—on permanent or temporary loan? in expert facsimile editions or some other form?—to the countries of origin? If they all remain primarily in Europe or America, surely the future study of the Global Middle Ages cannot be global in any meaningful sense.

Bill Endres. *Digitizing Medieval Manuscripts: The St. Chad Gospels, Materiality, Recoveries, and Representation in 2D and 3D*. Medieval Media Cultures. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019. 120 pp. €69. ISBN: 978-19-4240-179-7 (hardback); 978-19-4240-180-3 (e-book).

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WHEN I WAS A postgraduate student, I spent my days in the Public Record Office in London grappling with the massive and unwieldy