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The Middle Ages goes global: Henri Pirenne, his thesis, and medieval globalities past and present

‘Briefly,’ wrote Henri Pirenne (1862–1935) in his acclaimed seven-volume history of his homeland, ‘the Belgian context is really a syncretism of the most diverse civilizations … it can be compared with Syria in antiquity, placed where great empires came into contact.’¹ Published in 1932 by a historian nearing the end of an illustrious career, Pirenne’s *L’Histoire de Belgique* represents a quintessential project of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography — the monumental national history. Yet these words also hint at Pirenne’s struggle with the nation as a sufficient unit of historical analysis (especially for a country like Belgium) and his gaze beyond that horizon. In this, Pirenne certainly has not stood alone. Over the past 100 years, a major preoccupation for medieval historians has been ‘the nation’ and its place in an international, and now global, field of vision. This paper examines the motivations and approaches historians have taken to a global Middle Ages. We shall focus on two key moments. First, looking to the post-war milieu of 1920s Europe, the paper argues that Pirenne turned toward a more global concept of the Middle Ages. Examining his controversial work, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1935), as well as his post-war speeches and historiographical writing, we shall see how Pirenne was responding not only to the experience of war and internationalism, but also expressing deeper concerns with historical practice and the way historians had approached the Middle Ages. His is a fascinating, and often neglected, story. Then we shall examine the

¹ ‘Bref, le milieu belge est tellement une synchrétisme des civilisations les plus diverses qu’on peut comparer à la Syrie de l’antiquité, placée comme lui au point de contact des grands empires et, comme lui, en rapport constants avec eux par son commerce et son industrie’: Henri Pirenne, *L’Histoire de Belgique VII* (Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1932), p. 393.
recent emergence of formal disciplinary approaches to a global Middle Ages, now blossoming with new journals, projects and research centres. Here, the paper examines scholarship on world-systems theory, medieval art and the transmission of intellectual culture. The paper argues that, far from being a novel development, the global Middle Ages has a longer pedigree and that current approaches reveal a promising framework for medieval globality that looks beyond national frames of reference.

It is useful to begin by briefly considering exactly what we mean by ‘global history’, its specific relevance for the Middle Ages and, in doing so, clarify the concept of global history to be adopted throughout this paper.

Broadly speaking, ‘global history’ can refer to a variety of historiographical forms and practices. However, we can identify three core understandings, which are by no means mutually exclusive. First, and one which medieval historians increasingly tend to eschew, is global history as world history, total history or big history. This is the history of world civilisations, regions or nations presented with an almost encyclopedic equivalence or parity and often narrated with big-picture turning points, such as the works of Arnold J. Toynbee and William McNeill. The second concept concerns itself with the history of modern globalities such as empire, capitalism or globalization. Here, global histories trace the emergence of a

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2 The following is a detailed, although not exhaustive, example of initiatives. Journals include Graeca-Arabica, Medieval Encounters, Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies and, most recently, The Medieval Globe (see http://www.arc-humanities.org/the-medieval-globe.html). Projects include the Defining the Global Middle Ages Network (Oxford University), the Global Middle Ages Project (University of Texas), MappaMundi, ‘Postcolonising the Medieval Image’ (University of Leeds) and ‘Art, Space & Mobility in the Early Ages of Civilization: The Mediterranean, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent’ (Kunsthistorisches Institut Florence).

of contemporary, globalised world or are positioned squarely within modernity (for example, the work of Jürgen Osterhammel, Christopher Bayly or Kenneth Pommeranz). Third, global history is also understood as encompassing a set of strategies that challenge history’s traditional spatial limits (such as the nation) and incorporate concepts of movement to which we have become more attune (for example, histories that examine migration or cross-boundary networks). These approaches include histories that are interconnected, entangled, transnational, cross-cultural and so on. In this case, global history is not just about scale (scale on its own being the preserve of world history) but, crucially, also about mobility (connecting people, places and objects).

Of the abovementioned concepts of global history, the second poses a particular problem for the medieval historian since it conceptualises the global as a marker of modernity. A quick survey of published global histories will certainly highlight how the ‘early modern’ fifteenth or sixteenth centuries so often figure as departure points, rendering the Middle Ages not only pre-modern but pre-global too. Moreover, while medieval historians such as Thierry Dutour argue for globalization’s medieval origins, this rebuttal does tend to place a rather narrow and teleological limit on the ‘global’ part of global history. To define globality solely by reference to contemporary experiences of globalization, or to make it the preserve of modernity,

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5 Dutour locates the origins of globalization in the medieval cities: Thierry Dutour, ‘La mondialisation, une aventure urbaine: Du Moyen Âge au “Globalblabla”’, Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire, no. 81 (January–March 2004), pp. 107–17. Dutour’s argument brings to mind Pirenne’s designation of medieval cities as the origins of capitalism. As will be seen later, economic history, trade and urban centres remained more central in Pirenne’s overall approach to historical analysis than the nation or race.
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ocludes premodern globalities despite evidence of their existence. In Aux origines de l’histoire globale (2014), Sanjay Subrahmanyam explains that while Anglophone writers often imagine global history as invented in the early twentieth century, there are medieval antecedents, especially in the Arabo-Islamic world. In other words, in the ‘premodern’ Middle Ages, we can find a global consciousness, albeit not equivalent to our own. It is the third concept of global history, as about scale and mobility, that historians currently deploy in writing a global Middle Ages, rather than world history or identifying medieval origins for modern globalities. Given this, we shall chiefly employ this concept of global history and globality throughout the paper.

Global history figured as the main theme of the 2000 International Congress of Historical Science in Oslo. Seventy-two years earlier, historians also gathered in Oslo for the 1928 Congress, where the concept of the nation featured high on the agenda. But what most agitated debate and discussion, if we are to believe the reports of Lucien Febvre and medievalist François-Louis Ganshof, was a paper delivered by Henri Pirenne on Mohammed and Charlemagne. Thus, it is to Pirenne and his thesis that we must now turn.

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6 In reference to modernity, Geraldine Heng distinguishes the phenomenality of modernity from its expression, arguing that the two are never co-identical. If we apply this to globality, it is possible to talk about modern and premodern globalities without them being co-identical or even contiguous. Geraldine Heng, ‘Early Globalities and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique’, Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory Vol. 26, nos. 2–3 (Summer/Fall 2014), p. 239.

7 ‘De leur côté, des auteurs anglophones ont souvent imaginé que le sujet avait été inventé dans la première moitié du XXᵉ siècle’: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Aux origines de l’histoire globale (Paris: Collège de France, 2014), p. 27. Subrahmanyam explains, for example, that the expansion of the Islamic world from Iberia to India (and presumably the concept of the ummah) necessitated accounts of other peoples and their histories such as the Kitāb al-Hind (‘The Book of India’) (p. 10). Also of note is Said al-Andalusi’s Book of the Categories of Nations, a survey of scientific history and knowledge across the Near East and Mediterranean written in the eleventh century.

8 Febvre wrote, ‘In the evening, the greatest historians in the world assembled spontaneously in order to discuss the speech of the Belgian master with passion … we had never experienced anything of that kind before, and we have never experienced it since’: quoted in Karl Dietrich Erdmann, Toward a Global Community of Historians: The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences, 1898–2000 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), p. 126. According to Erdmann, Ganshof considered the discussion prompted by Pirenne to be ‘one of the most sensational results of the Congress’ (p. 131).
First presenting his thesis in 1922 as an article, ‘Mahomet et Charlemagne’, Pirenne continued to write and lecture on it right up until his final year, with the book, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, published posthumously in 1935. According to his thesis, it was the seventh-century arrival of Islam that caused the definitive break of East–West unity in the Mediterranean (and not the fifth-century Germanic invasions), propelling the Carolingian West into isolation and the onset of the Middle Ages. Thus, as the famous line goes, ‘without Mohammed, Charlemagne would have been inconceivable’. The thesis challenged conventional explanations that made the fifth-century barbarian migrations, and thus ‘Germanic civilisation’, the decisive factor. Indeed, Pirenne’s denial of German exceptionalism is fundamental to his thesis. He wrote:

> Of the German institutions, of the assemblies of free men, nothing was left. At most, what we find, here and there, in the laws of the period, Germanic infiltrations, like that of the *Wehr geld*. But this was a mere trickle in the flood of juridical Romanization … there appeared no germ of a new civilization.

*Romania*, he argued, survived the barbarian Germanic invasions and, as the various barbarian cultures embedded themselves within Roman culture, a syncretic Romano-Germanic culture emerged as the foundation for the Middle Ages. There is a further important layer to Pirenne’s thesis — namely, that it is predicated on a pre-Islamic Mediterranean that was dynamic and interconnected. The Syrians and Byzantines, he explained, connected the East and West in the wake of Rome’s collapse.

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12 Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, p. 80. Pirenne also wrote of Syrians as far north as Orleans and Britain in the early Middle Ages.
The Syrians were then the great maritime carriers, as the Dutch were to be in the 17th century. It was in Syria vessels that the spices of the East and the industrial products of the great Oriental cities — Antioch, Damascus, Alexandria, etc. — were exported. The Syrians were to be found in all the ports of the Mediterranean.

Upon Islam’s expansion into the Mediterranean, Pirenne argued, this East–West unity and Syrian presence ended. Importantly, he suggests this had less to do with a ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and Christianity, and more to do with pragmatic factors such as piracy and the new Muslim arrivals accessing markets elsewhere availability in Islam’s growing empire. The notion of connection is also central to Pirenne’s other celebrated work, *Medieval Cities*, where he places mercantile, cultural and political connections between civilisations at the centre of the rise and fall of cities (for example, he writes of Kievan Rus dealing with Baghdad and Constantinople, and identifies the participation of Venice and Flemish cities in international trade as the cause of Europe’s eleventh-century revitalisation).  

As we unpack the content of Pirenne’s thesis, we can identify two core approaches, both of which lend it a global dimension: scope and connectivity. First, as Pirenne’s provocatively titled thesis suggests, he broadened the map of Europe’s Middle Ages, integrating Charlemagne (and the Carolingian West) into a geographically wider history (namely, Arab/Islamic expansion). It is as if, by zooming out from a *Romania–Germania* (read, France–Germany) focus that had for so long defined the field of vision, Pirenne was able to see more of the globe. 

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14 As mentioned earlier, one of the consequences of Pirenne’s thesis was the rebuttal of a divide between Europe’s two civilisations — Romance and Germanic. One could read this as Pirenne refuting the ‘clash of civilisations’ depiction of Franco-Prussian/German relations that dominated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical thinking. Indeed, Patrick Geary attributes the emergence of nationalism in German history to the Franco-Prussian conflict of the nineteenth century: Patrick Geary,
example, he attributes the decline of the West’s commerce in the Mediterranean not just to Islamic–Christian conflict but to Islam’s extensive empire that offered markets elsewhere (such as the Rus, Vikings and further afield). Second, connectivity underpinned his entire thesis — that is, the unity or disunity of the Mediterranean explained chiefly in terms of commercial mobility. These two elements, scope and connectivity, suggest that *Mohammed and Charlemagne* points towards a global account of Middle Ages transitions.

Pirenne’s thesis was controversial not only because of its implications, but also because of his alleged motivations. How are we to understand Pirenne’s arrival at his thesis? We must first examine the political and personal context of Pirenne’s work in the post-war period. Second, we will consider Pirenne’s historiographical observations and analysis. We shall see that while war and internationalism provoked much in Pirenne’s global turn, it also represents a deep historiographical shift with a pre-war origin.

As Pirenne explained at his address to the International Congress of Historical Science in 1923, the First World War was to historians what a cosmic cataclysm is to geologists. Moreover, his experience was personal. Within months of the war’s outbreak, in the Fall of 1914, his son Pierre was killed in battle at the Yser River, and then, in March 1916, Pirenne was arrested for resistance at the University of Ghent.

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15 There is a tendency to see Pirenne as arguing that the Arabo-Islamic world suppressed trade. Janet Abu-Lughod is among these. But Pirenne’s point is more subtle — namely, that the result of Islamic expansion was to create an extensive civilization (or, to use Abu-Lughod’s language, world-system) and thus better markets elsewhere, including with Scandinavia and Kievan Rus. While Pirenne’s focus is on the Mediterranean, he does not suggest this is the only theatre of commercial activity, which is what lends his analysis a global dimension.

and held in captivity until Armistice. But it was the petition signed on 4 October 1914 by 93 German academics (including historians) endorsing the war — the Aufruf an die Kulturweit (Appeal to the Civilised World) — that would prompt Pirenne to question history’s complicity in the war. After the war, Pirenne spoke openly about history’s complicity, arguing that, in service to the nation-state, history had provided the justifications and pretexts for war. German historians attracted particular criticism from Pirenne, with many of his lectures and papers of the post-war period directed against the nationalism of German historicism. Pirenne’s diminution of Germanic culture in establishing the Middle Ages, as set out in his thesis, together with his criticism of the nation as a framework for historical analysis, certainly forms part of his response to the war.

The other context for Pirenne’s thesis and reassessment of national history was the growing trend towards internationalism, both in society generally and in historical practice. At the 1913 London Congress of Historical Science, medieval historian Viscount James Bryce announced that the time had come for international history, which required historians to uncover universal connections and take advantage of history’s enlarged scope (both in terms of time and space). In 1923, John Franklin

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17 Pirenne was arrested along with his Flemish colleague, Paul Frédéricq, for faculty resistance to plans to reopen the university under German auspices: Bryce Lyon, ‘Henri Pirenne’s Réflexions d’un solitaire and his re-evaluation of history’, Journal of Medieval History Vol. 23, no. 3, p. 287.
18 A copy of the manifesto (and a list of its signatories) is available in: ‘To the Civilised World’, The North American Review 210, no. 765 (August 1919), pp. 284–87. Among the signatories was Karl Lamprecht, a historian Pirenne held in the highest esteem, as we shall see. It was Lamprecht who, in 1894, commissioned Pirenne to contribute Belgium’s national history to his Geschichte der Europäischen Staaten (History of European States) project. See Bryce Lyon, ‘Henri Pirenne’s Réflexions’, p. 289.
19 ‘[L]es belligérants ont mis particulièrement deux sciences en requisition: l’histoire et la chimie. Celle-ci leur a fourni des explosifs et des gaz; celle-là, des pretexts, des justifications ou des excuses’: Pirenne, ‘De la méthode comparative’ [note, as this speech is an online document, there are no page references]. He continues to explain that, just as princes would put history in service of their ambition, now nation-states impose an even heavier task.
20 Erdmann, Towards a Global Community of Historians, p. 58. By the expansion of time and space, Bryce was referring to new understandings of pre-history (time) and history outside Europe (space).
Jameson, co-founder of the American Historical Association and first editor for the American Historical Review, urged a methodological shift away from nation-oriented political history and towards social/economic developments, since the former had ‘obscured the great processes by which the world had coalesced into what is in many respects already one great society’. The same internationalist milieu that produced the League of Nations and other international organisations (including historical societies like the International Congress of Historical Science), also prompted medieval historians to rethink the nation’s role within history. Of course, the internationally renowned Pirenne was active in this milieu, his writings even influencing internationalist activists like fellow Belgian Paul Otlet. Thus Pirenne was writing in an internationalist context where historians were articulating global aspirations for historiography.

These experiences have led some to attribute Pirenne’s post-war global direction in history to revanchism and internationalist ideology. Walter Prevenier, for example, says of post-war Pirenne: ‘ceci n’est pas un historien’. However, Pirenne’s global turn had been in development earlier and was also driven by concerns internal to historiography.

There are two phases to Pirenne’s turn. Before the war, Pirenne was attracted to the cultural history (Kulturgeschichte) of Karl Lamprecht that was the subject of an

21 Jameson quote in Erdmann, Towards a Global Community of Historians, p. 74. One can detect the internationalist agenda in Jameson’s words. Erdmann explains that Jameson was among the figures who, during the war, had lobbied German authorities for Pirenne’s release (in addition the US President and Pope; p. 73).

22 In 1919, the International Academic Union was founded and based in Brussels with Pirenne as its president. Pirenne considered it an ‘Intellectual League of Nations’, this showing just how much internationalism kindled in a variety of areas of political, social and academic life. See Erdmann, Towards a Global Community of Historians, p. 70. David Laqua argues that internationalist sentiment was especially active in Belgium and notes Pirenne’s influence on Otlet: Daniel Laqua, The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 28.

intense polemical debate vis-à-vis Rankean political history.\(^\text{24}\) Coming out in defence of Lamprecht in 1897, Pirenne criticised the ‘history of the state’ epitomised by Ranke (whom Pirenne had met in 1884) and the *Jungrankanier*. While the state was the most apparent and visible form of society, Pirenne argued that it was an artificial phenomenon and far from accounting for all social activity. He wrote: \(^\text{25}\)

Due to Ranke, everyone places the history of the State at the forefront, that is to say, a relatively artificial phenomenon and one which is far from explaining all social activity … the State, in effect, if it is not the most powerful relation joining men together, it is certainly the most apparent and, if one can say, the most exterior.

The field of history needed to extend to the social sciences and Lamprecht’s cultural history because these pointed to more natural, collective, universal and primitive forces.\(^\text{26}\) Certainly, one of these forces for Pirenne would have been economic and commercial activity, which were peripheral to diplomatic history. It was a concern shared by Shlomo Goitein in the 1950s, who dedicated his life not to diplomatic archives, but the discarded business records of Jewish merchants in Cairo.\(^\text{27}\) Pirenne prophesied that history would no longer be a history of the state but

\(^{24}\) Lamprecht’s *Kulturgeschichte* was more popular outside Germany, while in Germany he was the subject of an intense polemical debate: Lyon, ‘Henri Pirenne’s Réflexions’, p. 288. That Lamprecht’s proposals for history were so deeply contested suggests that they were a very real and significant challenge to conventional German historicism. As Pirenne notes, Lamprecht never sought to placate Ranke but to challenge its monopoly over historical science: Henri Pirenne, ‘Une polémique historique en Allemagne’, *Revue Historique*, T. 64, Fasc. 1 (1897), pp. 56.

\(^{25}\) ‘Comme Ranke, tous mettent également au premier plan l’histoire de l’État, c’est-à-dire, d’un phénomène relativement artificial et qui est bien loin de résumer en lui toute l’activité sociale… L’État, en effet, s’il n’est pas le plus puissant des liens qui réunissent les hommes, en est certainement le plus apparent et, si l’on peut dire, le plus extérieur’: Pirenne, ‘Une polémique historique’, p. 52.

\(^{26}\) ‘Dans l’ordre économique comme dans l’ordre spirituel, l’individu n’est isolé que par abstraction … La société est l’élément universel et primitive, l’individu le phénomène contingent et passager’: Pirenne, ‘Une polémique historique’, p. 55. By ‘individual’, Pirenne is referring to figures of the state. By ‘primitive’, Pirenne would have in mind the kind of instincts that motivate merchants or commercial activities, wherever they hail from.

\(^{27}\) These are the Geniza archives. Goitein wrote in his first article on the Geniza documents: ‘Typical of the attitude of an older generation of scholars is a remark like the following, found in the printed catalogue of a very famous library, with regard to an interesting Geniza document: “business letter and therefore valueless”’: Shlomo Goitein, ‘From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia, and East Africa from the Eleventh to the Twelfth Centuries’, *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* Vol. 29, no 2 (April 1954), p. 183.
concerned with the interactions nations (understood as a collective people) would have with other nations. Thus, as early as 1897, Pirenne was turning towards concepts of social and cultural interaction as frameworks for understanding the past.

The second phase of Pirenne’s turn comes after the war, and was unabashedly critical of German historicism. Lamprecht’s *Kulturgeschichte* located the story of the nation not in the state but in the people (or *Volk*), and it is his racial concept of nation that Pirenne critiqued after the war. In his 1923 Congress address, Pirenne reiterated his concerns about the nation as an adequate focus for historians, this time adding Lamprecht’s ‘fatal theory of the races’. The idea of a national identity, according to Pirenne, while a heuristic metaphor used to represent a collective as a single person, inadequately reflected (and potentially obscured) a more complex reality. Just as autobiography, which once wrote of great heroes solely with reference to themselves, later placed that individual in their ‘own space in the world’, so too history needed to move beyond ‘le point de vue ethnocentrique’. Further, while Pirenne distanced himself from Lamprecht’s racial theory, he maintained faith with the German historian’s reliance on social sciences — it is not race that reveals anything objective about a group of people, but conditions such as geography, economics and culture.

Comparative history was offered by Pirenne as the salvation that would lead historians away from the golden calf of the nation and towards a more scientific

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28 ‘[L]es histoires particulières ne seront plus des histoires d’États … mais l’histoire des actions réciproques que les nations exercent les unes sur les autres’: Pirenne, ‘Une polémique historique’, p. 55.

29 The scientific consequences of this ‘fatale théorie’, wrote Pirenne, were no less disastrous than their political ones: Henri Pirenne, ‘De l’influence allemande sur le mouvement historique contemporain’, *Scientia: Rivista Internazionale di Sintesi Scientifica* Vol. 34, no. 137 (1923), p. 175.

30 Pirenne explained that race was just a cover for masking the complexity of social relations. In a sense, it was just as useful as not knowing. ‘Et cela revient à dire qu’invoquer la race, c’est une manière d’affirmer notre ignorance, et qu’en bonne méthode il serait plus sage de l’avouer que de pretender résoudre l’inconnu par l’inconnu’: Pirenne, ‘De la méthode comparative’.

31 Pirenne, ‘De la méthode comparative’.
approach. He proposed comparative ethnography as a suitable tool of analysis. Both in terms of content and structure, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* is comparative — structurally divided into two parts that compare the Merovingians with Carolingians, as well as the later to Kievan Rus in the east.

Pirenne did not live to implement his ideas further, but he certainly left a legacy of influence. When Pirenne lectured in Algiers in 1931 on his Mohammed and Charlemagne thesis, Fernand Braudel was in the audience. In an article that opens with the question, ‘How was I shaped as a historian?’, Braudel wrote of these lectures: ‘His lectures seemed prodigious to me; his hand opened and shut, and the entire Mediterranean was by turns free and locked in!’ Of course, Braudel would himself go on to talk of globality and, in turn, influence the world-systems theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Janet Abu-Lughod.

But it was another of Pirenne’s disciples who is significant for our purposes — the Arabist, medieval historian, acclaimed founder of a professional history of science and fellow Belgian, George Sarton. When Sarton set out his proposal for a history of science in the first volume of the journal he established, *Isis*, he concluded by urging an internationalist approach that reflected Pirenne’s post-war concerns about history generally. Hinting Pirenne’s concerns, Sarton wrote: ‘Science divided into water-

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32 Pirenne, ‘De la méthode comparative’.
33 Fernand Braudel, ‘Personal Testimony’, *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 44, no. 4 (December 1972), p. 452. Braudel continues, saying that it was this moment that encouraged him to pursue his ideas on the Mediterranean, almost as a response to Pirenne.
34 ‘[L]a globalité, l’histoire global que je defends, s’est imposée à moi peu à peu … La globalité, ce n’est pas la pretention d’écrire une histoire totale du monde. Ce n’est pas cette pretention puerile, sympathie et folle. C’est simplement le désir, quand on a abordé un problem, d’en dépasser systematiquement les limites’: Fernand Braudel, ‘En guise de conclusion’, Review Vol. 1, nos. 3–4 (Winter/Spring 1978), p. 245. Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, both supporters of ‘the Belgian master’, would invite Pirenne to act as chief editor to a publication they were going to launch called *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*.
tight compartments makes us feel uneasy — a world split into selfish and quarrelsome nations is too narrow for us. We need the full experience of other countries, of other races.\textsuperscript{36} Sarton wanted to put the ‘immense experience of the East’ on the same level as the West.\textsuperscript{37} Pirenne and Sarton entered into correspondence in the 1920s and, in a series of exchanges, Pirenne dissuaded Sarton from eugenic and racial theory in historical practice. He later wrote to Sarton, ‘All efforts like yours that tend to broaden the overly narrow horizon that hems us in are admirable. And they are beneficial, because they point the way to the future.’\textsuperscript{38} Sarton would go on to play a leading role in encouraging the Spanish Arabists to incorporate medieval Arabic science into their purview and took Millàs Vallicrosa under his wing.\textsuperscript{39} Sarton and Vallicrosa would instigate the study of Arabic–Latin translation practice in medieval Iberia.\textsuperscript{40} Sarton would go on to write a world history of science and, in 1936, he published ‘The Unity and Disunity of the Mediterranean’, a remarkable analysis of premodern cultural exchange in the Mediterranean that stands between Pirenne and Braudel.\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{itemize}
\item Sarton, ‘The History of Science’, p. 359. He continues later to argue that such an approach would ‘disentangle us from many local and national prejudices’ (p. 361).
\item The Spanish Arabists had been researching the transmission of eastern music and literature to the west in medieval Spain. Sarton’s goal was to encourage them to incorporate the field of medieval science into their work. Sarton argued against the classification of science into eastern and western, instead figuring the pursuit of scientific knowledge as an international quest, See Thomas F. Glick, ‘George Sarton and the Spanish Arabists’, Isis Vol. 76, no. 4 (December 1985), pp. 490 and 496.
\end{itemize}
As we can see from the above, Pirenne made a decisive break with traditional practices of historiography, laying the foundations for a global concept of the Middle Ages that no longer fused the medieval world to the nation. How does this legacy sit among medieval historians today? How have the challenges and solutions altered? We now turn to these questions.

Concerns about the nation as a framework for writing medieval history have persisted into our own times and are being negotiated by disciplinary moves towards a global Middle Ages. The most notable contemporary assessment of the nation’s entanglement in medieval history is Patrick Geary’s *The Myth of Nations: Medieval Origins of Europe* (2003), in which Geary remarks that ‘the real history of the nations that populated Europe in the early Middle Ages begins not in the sixth century but in the eighteenth’.42 A renewed vigour for national history emerged in the postcolonial world, as European colonies mobilised national identities to achieve independence from European imperial powers. Historian David Ludden gives the example of how Indian history was nationalised as a strategy to ‘displace foreign with native power over the past’.43 As a consequence, however, there’s a tendency to see medieval South Asia as an ‘undifferentiated monolith’.44 Further, just as the imperial British were cast as foreign invaders, so too nationalist historiography framed India’s medieval Islamic

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past within a ‘Manichean dyad’ of Hindu contra Islamic.\(^{45}\) Yet, as both Ludden and Barry Flood point out, this goes against the reality of premodern South Asia where boundaries between Islam and Hindu cultures were less closed and more mobile.\(^{46}\) Similar issues arise in Ottoman/Turkish history, where the multi-ethnicity of medieval Anatolia has been figured as a precursor to Ottoman Empire and Turkish identity, occluding Armenian and Greek histories in the region.\(^{47}\) A related issue is the enduring centrality of the Western historical narrative, and Africa is of note here. Maghan Keita argues that African history, at least in a global context, has been temporally and geographically fixed to a western history of Atlantic slavery.\(^{48}\) Seeking to untie African history from the West, Keita writes of a pre-Columbian Africa that is connected to Asia via the Indian Ocean, noting the presence of merchants in Ceylon, Zanj slaves (from Zanzibar) in Iraq and an African presence even as far as China.\(^{49}\) Globality offers new ways of reconnecting these postcolonial territories to the world independent of former colonial/imperial framework.

The question is then: how are medieval historians challenging the nation and Eurocentrism in writing of the Middle Ages, and working towards global accounts of the period?

\(^{45}\) Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 2.
\(^{49}\) Keita, ‘Africans and Asians’, p. 2. ‘Zanj’ is a medieval Arabic term used to refer to populations on Africa’s Swahili coast.
Without a doubt, Janet Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (1989) is the crucial foundation for most medievalists writing global histories of the Middle Ages today. Drawing on the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Abu-Lughod posited the thirteenth century as a period of extensive contact and integration between world systems (and their sub-systems), and a period without a single hegemonic power (hence, ‘before European hegemony’).\(^{50}\) Abu-Lughod was ‘keen to force scholars away from their Euro-American vantage point’ and an account for ‘the Rest of the World’.\(^{51}\) Just as Pirenne took a more global approach to make a case against German exceptionalism in the Middle Ages, so too Abu-Lughod put Europe in its global place to argue against European exceptionalism as the explanation for its early modern rise.\(^{52}\) Abu-Lughod thus mapped a world system that enabled medieval historians to talk about globality and regional connections in the Middle Ages.

Building on world-systems theory, some medieval historians have advocated for world-systems that are not simply commercial or trade-oriented, pointing to the medieval Dar al-Islam and ‘Pax Mongolica’. John Orbert Voll, for example, argues that, while premodern Islam was not the kind of world empire or commercial world-system Wallerstein and Abu-Lughod talk about, it still remained a ‘vast network of

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\(^{50}\) Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 4. Abu-Lughod identifies three world-systems in the thirteenth century: Western European, Middle Eastern and Far-Eastern. Each of these are comprised of smaller sub-systems that overlap with sub-systems for other world-systems and contains urban nodes that function as meeting places for merchants and non-local trade (p. 33).

\(^{51}\) Janet Abu-Lughod, ‘Middle East–Asian Connections: Before, During and After Western Hegemony’, created 23 March 2001, The Centre for Middle East Studies hosted by the University of California Santa Barbara, USA, <http://www.cmes.ucsb.edu/meastsasia/janetl.html>, viewed 9 June 2015. Abu-Lughod explains that the motivation behind *Before European Hegemony* was to address what she saw as the inadequacy of Wallerstein’s world-system in explaining a pre–‘Rise of the West’ system, despite evidence of a medieval consciousness of a global.

\(^{52}\) Abu-Lughod, an expert on urbanism, also shares with Pirenne an understanding of the fundamental role of cities and commerce as the nodes and fibres of these worlds.
interacting peoples’ stretching from Iberia to India. Voll proposes a world system that is a ‘community of discourse’, which, in the case of the Islamic world, was underpinned by networks of tariqahs, sufis and madrasas. Such a system provided ‘the basis for mutually intelligible discourse among all who identity themselves as Muslim’ without the need to talk about a political unit such as empire or state. This is the world-system of Ibn Battuta, Sarah Stroumsa’s Maimonides and Nile Green’s Sufis. Historians also make a similar case for Mongol Eurasia, as a basis for thirteenth-century integration. Thus what we see is the need for a concept of world-system that speaks to the medieval experience of cross-boundary connection, networks and globality.

Much of the leading work on globality in the Middle Ages is currently undertaken in the field of art history, where historians are deploying concepts like portability and mobility to surmount static approaches. Within traditional art history, spatial boundaries manifest in two ways: first, a focus on provenance or roots that seeks to isolate art objects to a locality; and, second, taxonomic structures that ‘aspire to be global but remain local’. In the case of the second, portable objects are fixed in

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54 Voll, ‘Islam as a Special World-System’, p. 219. In a medieval Latin Christian context, we could talk of a ‘community of discourse’ built around monastic, scribal or scholastic communities, which played fundamental roles in the European Middle Ages.
56 Matthew Canepa writes that the ‘Mongol Empire provides the grandest example of all incorporating most of Eurasia as its vassals’: Matthew Canepa, ‘Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction Among Ancient and Early Medieval Visual Cultures’, *Ars Orientalis* Vol. 38 (2010), p. 11.
national, regional or temporal categories whether in museums or art history surveys, or figured within a ‘Pyramids-to-Picasso’ Rise of the West narrative.\textsuperscript{58} These categories, Robert Nelson argues, can function politically, culturally and ideologically. An example provided by Flood, is the distinction between ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ that dominates South Asian historiography, positioning temples and mosques at ‘two extremes of a bipolar cultural.\textsuperscript{59} And yet, as Flood argues, art objects and their histories are messier than this, particular in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{60} Pin-pointing an artefact’s production to Armenia, Persia or China tells just a fragment of that object’s story.

Faced with static systems of provenance and taxonomy on the one hand, and the messy or layered reality of medieval art objects on the other, medieval art historians have turned to concepts of portability, mobility and the nexus of global and local. Eva Hoffman best presents this approach by seeing objects as situated in a shared visual vocabulary that is global (using the Mediterranean as an example) but that are appropriated and redeployed locally. In the global milieu of the Mediterranean, portable objects were produced, circulated, translated and appropriated in new and different local contexts. She gives the example of Norman Sicily, where the mantle of Roger II bears Kufic script and eastern pictoral imagery (both part of a shared visual vocabulary whose significance, if not meaning, the Norman Roger understood) and using it to express local power.\textsuperscript{61} Alicia Walker’s

\textsuperscript{58} Curiously, as Nelson observes, art history surveys tend to periodise the continuum of European art history, while non-European art categories tend to remain spatial and geographic: see Nelson, ‘The Map of Art History’, pp. 29 and 33.
\textsuperscript{59} Flood, Objects of Translation, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{60} In Objects of Translation, Flood details the mixing of Islamic and Indic imagery in mosques and temples in the Sind region, as well as art objects. How are we to understand the taxonomies of these architectural sites and art objects?
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The production of the object is just part of a story of circulation and dynamic interaction within a visual culture that crosses boundaries and employs multiple local meanings. Again Hoffman gives the study of a thirteenth-century Ayyubid amulet featuring Christian narratives and appropriated by crusaders as an expression of their own Holy Land involvement.

The crusaders did not consider the oriental styling (the *globally* shared visual culture) as sitting under a taxonomy of ‘Ayyubid’ or ‘Islamic art’ but as belonging to their own *local* meanings around the Holy Land. Matthew Canepa provides an example of Mongol imagery incorporated into Armenian manuscripts after the Armenian ruler Het’um (r. 1226–1270), visiting Karakorum, was given a jisün robe from the Mongol khan, Möngke. While in a Mongol context the robe symbolized subjection, the robe (and its imagery) was incorporated as an expression of aristocracy and power in an Armenian context. Once again, we have an example of a shared visual culture deployed locally, with a variation on meaning.

Walker, ‘Globalism’, pp. 188–92. Walker’s analysis is a great example of how looking at an object within tight national or cultural bounds occludes important elements of the object’s story. In the case of the Darmstadt Casket, looking through the single lens of ‘Byzantine’ art history resulted in imagery from outside that history (Arabic or Indian) being classified as hodge-podge.

Hoffman makes the important point that taxonomies that may be relevant to historians or curators today were not necessarily relevant to people in the Middle Ages. Crusaders, for example, would not have classified objects as ‘Ayyubid’ or ‘Islamic’. Rather, they incorporated them into their own systems of meaning — in this case, the object’s visual vocabulary referenced the Holy Land. See, Eva R. Hoffman, ‘Christian–Islamic Encounters on Thirteenth-Century Ayyubid Metalwork: Local Culture, Authenticity and Memory’, *Gesta* Vol. 43, no. 2 (2004), p. 137.

In an effort to avoid a Mongol attack, visited the khan at Karakorum to pledge cooperation and in return (as a symbol of his subjection) received the robe. See Canepa, ‘Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction’, p. 16. Het’um is also known for having tried to convince the Frankish Crusaders to follow his example.
Similar cross-cultural practices are underway in accounting for intellectual exchange and textual cultures in the Middle Ages. Medieval historiography is often ‘a battlefield of statements’ about the relationship between Islam and the West, according to Jorge Feuchter, and this is no less true for polemic around the western intellectual inheritance from Arabic scholarship. In 2008, this played out when French medievalist Sylvain Gouguenheim’s essay, *Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel* (2008), sparked a controversy that spilled into the mainstream media. Gouguenheim rejected the idea of a transfer of Aristotle’s works into Latin via Arabic, instead arguing there was sufficient knowledge of Greek within France without requiring an outside transfer. Leading French medievalists hastened to write responses attacking or supporting Gouguenheim’s claims, as the old polemic gained renewed energy. This experience highlights one of the challenges for understanding medieval intellectual exchange, often expressed in a *grand récit* of unidirectional exchange creating the intellectual rise of the West, with the Arabo-Islamic world cast as a temporary minder or container of knowledge and Byzantium as a peripheral participant (and subsequent intellectual decline of these latter two worlds). This is compounded by a lack of integration at a disciplinary level, with Latin, Byzantine, Islamic, Jewish and Oriental studies quite isolated.

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68 This is a point expressed by leading practitioners in the field, especially those working in an eastern context. Sabine Schmidtke, specialising in textual and intellectual culture in the medieval Islamicate world, writes, ‘Contemporary scholarship only gradually addresses intellectual phenomena across denominational borders. The rigid borders between academic disciplines such as Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies or Christian Oriental Studies often prevent such endeavours’: Sabine Schmidtke, ‘Introduction’, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* Vol. 2 (2014), p. 3.
Yet, the words we use to talk about medieval textual culture, ‘translation’ and ‘transfer’, denote a crossing in their shared Latin root (transfero) and demand a cross-cultural understanding.\(^{69}\) What would a history of medieval intellectual culture look like outside a grand récit narrative of an exchange between a receiving culture and a transferring one? The answer seems to lie in understanding the practices of translation and transmission as dynamic, interactive and mobile. In lieu of a civilizational exchange, historians are increasingly coming to see textual practices as constituted by networks of exchange where the texts are never stable and the participants form part of a more cosmopolitan, mobile community.\(^{70}\) Eva Hoffman advocates that the practice of translation itself, and not a priori concepts like nation or civilizational exchanges, should shape ‘the contours of the space of transaction’ and the way it is approached by historians. Using the example of translations of Dioscorides’ De Materia Medica, one of the most popular texts on herbal medicine, Hoffman explains how texts themselves were sites of redactions, rectifications, multilingual transcriptions, notations, commentaries and glosses — in other words, they mapped cross-cultural activity.\(^{71}\) Such an approach broadens the scope of medieval textual culture beyond a simple East-to-West narrative and to include regions hitherto marginalised (such as North Africa) or not integrated (such as the Karaite Jewish communities in southern France and Spain).\(^{72}\)

The concept of a global Middle Ages may taking disciplinary shape only now, but it is certainly not novel. Our analysis of Pirenne demonstrates that its themes and concerns have a longer pedigree, one that incorporates Lamprecht’s cultural history.

\(^{69}\) ‘Translatum’ is the supine form.


break from German historicism as well as the international outlook of historians in the 1920s. Having examined more recent approaches by historians, is it possible to plot an approach to medieval globality? How can historians avoid analytical constructs that, as Eugene Wang points out with reference to Silk Road literature, ‘can be anachronistically modern and oftentimes driven by contemporary agendas, such as nationalism’?73 Certainly, Abu-Lughod’s thirteenth-century world-system has served well as a base for medieval globality but perhaps, with its emphasis on commercial contacts, it has the potential to lead to the constructs Wang identifies as problematic. However, what is needed is a concept of world-system that is less total-world and that speaks to the medieval experience, rather than matching a modern one. Here, Hoffman’s shared visual vocabulary and Voll’s concept of a world-system as a ‘community of discourse’ seem to point towards a promising direction. Together, they reflect the way people in the medieval past organised themselves in much the same ways that Pirenne had in mind — not necessarily according to political units (or art taxonomies or linguistically distinct scribal cultures) but to other, more fluid, collectivities and spaces. Certainly, thinking about the Middle Ages globally will compel historians to uncover the connections that have hitherto occupied blindspots within a national field of vision.

Provoked by the experience of war and the need for new historiographical paradigms for the Middle Ages outside the nation, Henri Pirenne advocated an approach that broadened its scope and emphasised cultural connections. *Mohammed and Charlemagne* represents a key step towards a medieval globality for others in his wake to build on. Over the past 20 years, medieval scholarship has made some

inroads into methodologies that work with different spatial frames and dynamics. We have seen world-systems theory articulate a global framework for this period, art historians position objects in shared networks of exchange and a more complex understanding of cross-cultural exchange in medieval intellectual cultures. A global Middle Ages presents an opportunity to renew the history of this period with a worldview no longer rooted in the nineteenth century.
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