

many ways a nineteenth-century writer who lived on into the next awful age. The memoir is utterly lacking in irony. Two elements appear to have misled its readers. The first is its subject: Tolstoy himself comes off as the massive, tormented precursor of modern man—a Moses of the Modern who peers into the promised land but does not enter it. Readers seem to have taken this to mean that Gorky was modern, too, when in fact the whole piece could be read as his attempt at exchanging one certainty (religion) for another (the collective faith in Man). The second is its open-ended, fragmented form, which looks not only modern but even modernist. For Gorky, however, this form was conceived not in a modernist spirit, out of experimentation and irony, but rather out of necessity. When he writes that he cannot finish his letter, he means it: he actually could not finish it. For us, however, there can be only modern writing. We have lost the ability to write with Gorky's certainty, or even to read him with certainty. Where Gorky saw a bridge, we see a chasm.

There was certainly a sense of the Promethean in Gorky's hopes for the Rus-

sian Revolution. Man would acquire for himself aspects of the gods and gradually replace them, in this way eliminating all suffering and chaos. Kafka himself retold the story of Prometheus, dividing it into four legends. In the first, Prometheus was chained to the Caucasus for betraying the gods to men, and eagles fed off his liver, which perpetually grew back; in the second, Prometheus pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock to escape the beaks, and became one with the rock; in the third, the betrayal was forgotten by the gods, the eagles, and by Prometheus himself; in the fourth, the gods and the eagles became tired of the meaningless story, and the wound closed wearily. Finally, Kafka concluded, "there remained the inexplicable mountains of rock." So, too, in the story of Gorky, we are left with rock: the rock of the hero Sviatogor, the "sacred mountain"; the rock of Tolstoy stretching himself like a mountain range; the rock of Vesuvius, seen from the Sorrento villa; the rock of the White Sea Canal; the mysterious rock of the individual; and the sight of a mountain that makes us imagine moving it, being negated by it, recreating it. ♦

pre-eminence not of local bulk trade, but of the long-distance pursuit of high-margin luxury goods. He then reconstructs the consequences of this trade in "trinkets and baubles" for the rise of towns, the wealth of the countryside, and the eventual limitation of aristocratic power. The cities of Italy, he wrote, "seem to have been the first in Europe which were raised by commerce to any considerable degree of opulence."

A century later Max Weber called his study of the same phenomenon *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*. And, also like Smith, he was fascinated by the problem of the end of the Roman world, which he pinned to the collapse of cities hastened by a demographic crisis, fiscal blundering, and the severing of reciprocal commerce with the countryside. But to Smith's particular brilliance Weber added his own: a commitment to comparison that led him to examine the agrarian cultures not just of the Roman Empire, but also of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, the Hellenistic East, and the Roman Republic. As he wrote in a letter to a narrow-minded political historian, "Some may well sneer, 'Dilettantes compare.'" (That same historian had the chutzpah to call Jacob Burckhardt a dilettante.) As Weber patiently explained, comparing a chosen phenomenon with its parallels was the only way to ensure that one person's exception was not another's commonplace. Moreover, Weber wrote, the purpose of comparison was not to "lump," but to "split": "to identify and define the individuality of each development, the characteristics which made the one conclude in a manner so different from that of the other."

And now, a century later still, a third monumental book tackles the "social causes of the decline of ancient civilization" (the title of another of Weber's essays). Chris Wickham's thousand-page page-turner—and, really, how many of those are there?—puts towns and countries, peasants and aristocrats, at its center, too. Wickham is a professor of medieval history at Oxford and the author of a series of notable books on twelfth-century Tuscany. In this tome he casts his net far wider, sifting evidence from the Syrian desert to the Spanish steppes, and from southern Tunisia to northern Ireland. The Mediterranean is at the core of his argument, as it was the core of the Roman

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THE BIG PICTURE

FRAMING THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES: EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN, 400-800

By Chris Wickham
(Oxford University Press, 990 pp., \$50)

ORIGINS OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMY: COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMERCE AD 300-900

By Michael McCormick
(Cambridge University Press, 1,130 pp., \$72)

A FEW YEARS AGO, I hitchhiked from the Benedictine monastery of Monte Oliveto, southeast of Siena, across rolling, forested, and sometimes craggy hills to the medieval hamlet of Amorosa, near the railway spur of Sinalunga. Waiting for the few passing cars left ample time to read the landscape all around me. A single glance took in lone farmhouses perched on hilltops, either falling apart or being renovated for German holidaymakers, and castles with or without houses sheltering in their lee,

and larger towns whose later growth had long since obscured their earlier castellated cores. And within that single vista there unfolded the history of the late Roman and early medieval landscape: villas abandoned, then recovered, then transformed into fortified castles, which served first as magnets for the defenseless and then—depending on various other circumstances—turned into towns.

So far as we know, Adam Smith never walked these hills, but the third book of *The Wealth of Nations*—the core of his historical vision—is devoted precisely to the transformation of the late antique landscape. Unlike his contemporary Edward Gibbon, the bulk of whose *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* deals with the same period, Smith's focus was on the "rebound," on how the rudiments of the modern "Progress of Opulence in Different Nations" could be located in those centuries spanning the end of the Roman Empire and the beginning of what he called modern—and we call medieval—Europe. Smith tries to explain the "unnatural and retrograde order" that drove the rise of modern Europe, namely the

world whose slow agony and equally slow recovery he analyzes.

This is a book and a subject with a pedigree that demands the closest attention. But when it appears only a few years after another thousand-page book on the end of the Roman world, Michael McCormick's *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900*, we have to ask what is going on. Why, all of a sudden, in an age of contracting academic publishing, is the early Middle Ages deemed so hot that important university presses are engaging in a new kind of escalation? And why the Mediterranean?

If there is one word to answer all this, to explain why these remarkable books are appearing now, and what they add to the classic interpretations of Smith and Weber, it is: archaeology.

II.

THE STUDY OF the material remains of the ancient world has its own long history, and by the second half of the nineteenth century it had reached maturity. A century later, however, the study of the material remains of the medieval world had hardly begun. Wickham notes that excavations have increased our knowledge in some cases a hundredfold, and that in some places this transformation is barely a decade old. What we are now witnessing, in other words, is the moment when finally there are enough pinpricks of light in the vast darkness of the past to begin seeing things. Half a century ago, Arnaldo Momigliano invoked the “hermeneutic of the antiquaries” as a key to understanding early modern European historical scholarship. Thinking about Weber in particular, he then described sociologists as their successors, as “armed antiquaries.” Wickham’s book marks the advent of the “hermeneutic of the archaeologists,” perhaps the armed humanists of our own time.

Archaeology is front and center in Wickham’s book. Quite literally: the cover is a photograph of one of the seven hundred deserted villages on the Limestone Massif between Aleppo and Antioch. Wickham describes these villages, and others in southern Syria and the northwestern Negev in Israel, as “arguably the most significant monuments to the late Roman world surviving anywhere, for they are monuments to the peasant majority, not to rich but atypical elites.”

And that is the second great effect of archaeology: it takes us beyond the people

privileged by and privileging texts, to the great masses who have preceded us on this planet. Ranke’s famous “history as it really was” is shifted, with the archaeologist’s brush and trowel, away from political history and toward social history. The new detail that Wickham is able to command is dazzling. In this book we encounter real comparison—one that lives up not just to Weber’s privately expressed credo, but also to Marc Bloch’s much more famous call for a new kind of history.

Wickham’s themes are big and clear: the fate of fiscality, aristocratic consumption, peasant life, and cultural geography. Analyzing how they interact in different places over time is Wickham’s project in this amazing book; and having done so, he can then “reframe” how we think about the early Middle Ages. “Fiscality,” simply put, means the ability to extract cash from dependents through taxes. It is one of the clearest marks of sophisticated political organization. In the ancient world, the Romans had it, but the Parthians and Carthaginians did not. Indeed, the late empire was united by its tax system: money flowing for the armies, capital cities, and civil administration. As with the railroads of the American West or the age-old routes over the Alpine passes, studying what Wickham arrestingly calls the “fiscal spine” is a matter of following the money. As he points out, its key articulation in the late Roman world connected the provinces of Africa and Byzaceia (modern Tunisia) with Italy through Sicily. Along this axis traveled the capital’s grain supplies and taxes; on it was based naval deployments; and along its trail were scattered the major senatorial—read: hyper-rich—landholdings. If the empire’s gain was the aristocracy’s, its collapse likewise anticipated their own. And, indeed, we cannot trace a single senatorial family beyond the year 600 C.E.; they and their wealth went down with the ship of state.

The West was stable in 400 C.E. Even in 500 and 600, the “Romano-Germanic” successor states were trying to stay Roman. But by 800 they had become unrecognizable to any self-respecting Roman of earlier days. Wickham suggests that in the post-Roman West the Mero-

vingian switch from taxation and a money economy to landed wealth marked the tipping point. The contrast with the East—the surviving Roman Empire—is striking. For there, though the Persian and Arab invasions of the seventh century de-

stroyed the old administrative structure, the state survived because taxation survived. And the province of the old Roman East that survived best, even into the first centuries of the Islamic era, was the one in which the fiscal structure changed least: Egypt. Huge papyrus archives uncovered in village digs reveal the workings of a late Roman fiscal system. But taxes can be collected only if officials are adequately informed, and information about wealth can be gathered only by constant prying effort. And so taxation not only yields more wealth, but in its functioning serves to hold the state together. Hence Wickham’s conclusion that Byzantium at its nadir was more cohesive than Visigothic Spain at its most powerful.

If the state as consumer—that is, the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean—drove the ancient economy, then its collapse shifted the entire burden onto its richest individuals. Hence Wickham’s focus on aristocratic consumption. He first observes that the imperial senatorial lifestyle was “unique in the pre-industrial world, with the sole exception of China, in that it was civilian.” After 500, this changed. The old cultural markers—*otium cum dignitate*, togas and villa life—disappear. Now the military garb of the empire—long tunic and cloak, heavy belt, and trousers—becomes the fashionable look for the secular aristocrats of the eighth century. This coincides with what Wickham suggests was the single biggest form of aristocratic consumption in the seventh and eighth centuries, even bigger than the amounts spent on church foundations or bejeweled clothing: private armies. Instead of a “crisis of the aristocracy,” Wickham would have us speak of the “militarization of aristocratic lifestyles.”

What real continuities there were lay at the level of city-based ownership. But here, too, “identity” was changing. Municipal politics shifted to informal patronage networks: less traditional, soon less civilian, and increasingly clerical. Consumption patterns changed dramatically as well. Just as exchange benefits those who have the most to exchange, the breakdown of exchange hurts those most involved in it.

A military aristocracy based on landed wealth looks a lot like a caricature, or a foretaste, of feudalism. But it is true—at least in 700—only for northern France. Comparison complicates things. For in Italy, war with the Goths (535–554) and the Lombards (586–589) devastated the elites. Those who survived were much poorer, and substantially stripped of



their landholdings. By 600, Italian elites were mostly city-based, their power structures built into those of the city. Now, instead of a recklessly anachronistic leap forward to feudalism, we might just as easily see Smith's communes beginning their inexorable rise already in the seventh century.

What was left of the Byzantine Empire after the Arabs had taken a bite out of it looked different again. Here, with a new system of cantoning troops, aristocratic life shifted from the old Roman cities to the new administrative departments (*themes*). Only the great capital city of Constantinople preserved any kind of civilian hierarchy. But here too, as in France and Italy, we can trace none of the great late antique families all the way to the threshold of the early seventh century, and only from the eighth do we see emergence of those new ones that would dominate the later Byzantine world. Indeed, we know that when these new eighth-century Byzantines walked their city, its Roman past—inscriptions, monuments, buildings—seemed to them like the traces of another people. Wickham relies heavily—and supremely intelligently—on ceramic data, long a key for archaeologists, skillfully showing how much historians can benefit from close attention to the chemical composition, style, and use of pottery. The disappearance or diminishment of imported ceramicware, or the decrease in its sophistication, or the shift to lower-grade production techniques or from commercial manufacture to the domestic handmade—all these are information-laden markers to the archaeologically minded historian.

The archaeology of the European countryside also documents the fate of the late Roman aristocracy. This is the site of Wickham's most revelatory scholarship. He aims at nothing less than recovering an entire lost history of the late Roman world: the "peasant mode" economy and the autonomous life of the majority of late Romans. In these discussions Wickham draws heavily on the other cultural sciences, sociology and anthropology. If the Melanesian "headman" helps him to explain the structure of Danish village life, it is Weber's use of the "ideal type" that helps him boldly go where the material evidence trails off into the mists of time.

In a tour de force, Wickham compares village life and structures in Lucca, the Middle Rhineland, the area around Paris, Ankara, and Aphrodito in Upper Egypt. But breathtaking in its audacity is his in-depth description of the lowland village of "Malling." For beyond the

archaeological detail, and the attention to social structure as it changed over time, and in addition to the comparison of this village with variant development paths taken by neighboring ones, there is the blunt fact, owned at the start by the author, that Malling did not exist. In this amazing tribute to Weber, Wickham has engaged in "a hypothetical reconstruction of a village society," doing what only someone with complete mastery of the terrain could dare. And then, as if not satisfied by his performance, Wickham turns around and uses Malling as a point of reference for analyzing real southern European villages!

This kind of attempt to reconstruct the "logic of peasant economies" is explicitly presented by Wickham as a practice of "model-building." The "peasant mode of production" emerges as an answer to the question about what would have happened if peasants did not have to give a surplus to aristocrats because aristocracies had so weakened in the general "involution and abatement of the Roman Empire" (as Wickham might rephrase Gibbon's famous title). His answer, spun out over dozens of pages, is that in the absence of external coercion, people would work less, production would decline, technological innovation would be stifled, and family size would shrink to accommodate lowered food resources. And, of course, in the absence of demand, the quality of goods produced would also sink. This theoretical model, Wickham reports, is exactly what we find in the ground.

Why does this matter? Because the relative balance of power between aristocrats and villagers had a direct impact on the social and political structures that followed. Thus, compared with France, "aristocratic domination was never as complete in Italy; landowners were not so large-scale, peasant owners were more common, there was more of a need for negotiation and mediation." Here we are again, back to the contrasting twelfth centuries of France and Italy: feudalism and the rise of the communes.

AS EVEN THIS superficial account makes clear, Wickham is always alert to the micro-regional reality of the late Roman world. Whether he is talking about the vicissitudes of the peasant-aristocrat balance, or the survival of Roman toponyms, or century-old field systems, or demand clusters, he never forgets that there was no Europe in this period, and no nations—that a strong man's writ often ran only as far as his eye could see, his voice could carry,

or his hand could reach. The fracturing of a common reality was visible on the ground in places such as the countryside northeast of Siena, where fifteen hundred years ago villas gave way to simple, randomly placed, isolated houses scattered across hill slopes; no settlement hierarchy; and ceramic "simplification." Yet just a few miles away, north and west of Siena, we are told, there was much more activity, more hierarchy, more sophistication.

Wickham's commitment to micro-regionalism is really a commitment to cultural geography, to the way in which human activity—*cultura* in the original sense—interacts with space. We see this in Wickham's treatment of the countryside, but it is equally true of his examination of urban life. Here changing fortunes could be localized as changes in political structures, in the location of aristocratic lodging within these cities and in their changing spatial organization. When city government collapsed, the maintenance of public amenities ceased. Some of this burden was taken over by bishops, but not all. When, on top of this, position in the state became more important than informal urban status, then urbanism was at risk (as it was in the Byzantine heartland).

On the other hand, Wickham argues that recent digging into late Byzantine and early Umayyad Syria suggests that this whole narrative may be misplaced. It raises the question about what constitutes abandonment, when the ceremonial space is not abandoned but rather re-zoned for industrial use. Is this decline? Or does it reflect a different set of cultural priorities? If the Arabs felt a need not for open monumental space but for shops, is this a "demonumentalization" or actually a sign of urban vitality? Is there, in fact, a different set of urban ambitions that need to be imagined, at least for the Islamic part of the late Roman world? (Ibn Khaldun, though, was less reticent about speaking in terms of "decline," and he, also contemplating the end of an ancient world—in his case the Arab Islamic dynasties that collapsed under Turkic attack just beyond Wickham's time horizon—had no compunction about identifying it with the fall of cities and their luxurious high cultures.)

Geography is culture in another concrete way, too. The public traffic along the "tax spine" between Africa and Rome also subsidized private trade. Wickham reports that in the Crypta Balbi in Rome—a fantastic new museum devoted to the transformation of a single space from late antiquity to the Middle Ages—100,000 potsherds were found, 47 percent of

which were amphorae used for commerce and that nearly half of these were African Red Slip, the Crate and Barrel of the Roman world. But after the final severing of this spine in 698 and the breaking of the Mediterranean in two, African Red Slip pots ceased to flow north, and one of the great artisanal traditions of the ancient world disappeared forever.

Long-distance trade depended upon the strength of the fiscal system. With it gone, this trade collapsed. Regional trade, which was all that was left, in turn depended on the strength of the aristocratic elite. Where this disappeared we get fifth-century Britain, sixth-century Ireland, or seventh-century Spain. In Wickham's story, the bigger your exposure to the long-distance imperial trade, the harder you fell when it disappeared. If northern France nevertheless emerged as powerful, that was because its concentration of landed wealth was almost enough to offset the end of the fiscal system. Similarly, the survival of late Roman Egypt was a function of the survival of its fiscal system, whose intensity was almost enough to compensate for the absence of a concentration of landed wealth. And, of course, Egypt had the Nile, which did for it what the Mediterranean did for the Roman Empire.

In the early Middle Ages, it was micro-demand that primed the pump. As Wickham writes, "The typical city in our period, in 800 as much as 400, and indeed up to the Industrial Revolution, was a focus for the surplus from *local* landowning, *local* aristocratic demand, *local* production, *local* markets for country-dwellers, and *local* political/administrative organization." Wickham's "typical" is intended to exclude from consideration Venice, Marseille, Amalfi, and the North Sea entrepôts that connected the Vikings with the East. In other words, Wickham is trying to leverage his thousand pages of fantastic research to overturn a two-century identification of what is distinctly *European* in European history with the "unnatural and retrograde order" created by long-distance trade. In the end, it is Wickham versus Adam Smith.

III.

ADAM SMITH'S PROXY in this fight is the great historian Henri Pirenne, who worked on the history of Belgium, of medieval cities, and, most famously, in *Mohammed and Charlemagne* in 1937, on the question of when, exactly, the ancient world ended. Pirenne argued that it was the severing

of the Mediterranean by the Arab armies in the seventh and eighth centuries that cut off the eastern supplies of gold, papyrus, olive oil, and spices that preserved what was still, in the sixth century, the Western Roman Empire in all but name. The financial and cultural impoverishment that followed transformed Europe, with landed wealth replacing gold and even silver, and the Carolingian North turning its back on the shores that once nourished what passed for civilization. At the heart of his argument was the documentary record of the presence and then the disappearance of those long-distance luxuries.

And so when Wickham rejects luxuries as peripheral to societies—"because I am here interested above all in systems, I shall not spend much space analyzing luxuries as a category"—he is trying to get out from under Pirenne's very long shadow. For him, it is the bulk trade—the trade in goods that are essential to the survival of the many, not the adornment of the few—that is history. "Historians who focus their attention on luxuries," he writes with more edge than anywhere else in the book, "are mostly not writing economic history at all." If medievalists have emphasized the luxury trade, we are told, it is because they have paid too

much attention to documents and not enough to pots, and because of “the mercantile romanticism of Venetian galleys plowing the seas, and of wharves loaded with bales of cloth.”

“Pirenne right or wrong?” is ultimately a less interesting game than recognizing Pirenne as the model for the radically new kind of history launched in his image by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the 1920s. They all viewed “economy” as another way of getting at the whole. Pirenne, like his model Karl Lamprecht, followed Burckhardt in looking beyond politics for historical meaning, but rejected the latter’s “high” cultural history for the former’s material grounding. This vision of “economic history as cultural history” dominated until the 1950s, when Febvre’s protégé Fernand Braudel turned to social science, creating a new ideal: “social history as cultural history.”

One of the amazing things about Braudel’s classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) is its breadth, stretched in unexpected ways from Timbuktu to the Gobi desert. One of the shocking things about it is the complete absence from it of individual people. Like those early photographs whose exposures were so long that individual people moving through the frame actually disappeared, Brau-

del’s view is so long that people leave no trace in its pages.

Something that Braudel’s early readers all noted—this was before his legend stifled any critical evaluation—was that the whole did not cohere. The geological and geographical gigantism pulled in so many different directions at the same time that the best one could say about the whole was that it offered a series of fantastically precise but disconnected descriptions of aspects of life in the Mediterranean world. Like the pointillism of Seurat or Signac, there was precision and clarity, but what made it work as a whole was juxtaposition, not seamlessness.

What micro-histories give up in scope, they give back in depth. Readers of Carlo Ginzburg or Natalie Zemon Davis happily make this trade-off. But what are we to make of one thousand pages of micro-histories? Chris Wickham, to his credit, is aware of the problem. “The resolutely regional focus of these brief characterizations precludes synthesis and comparison: even the Roman Empire almost vanishes from sight as a single unit as a result, and so does the crucial issue of the impact on different regions of the breakdown in Mediterranean unity.” And yet what we get instead, the “framing” of the title, is so general that one has to wonder at the extraordinary effort and skill

that has gone into proving almost everything we already knew about the late Roman world but could not formulate concisely: its fiscal structures simplified, its aristocracies weakened, its peasantries more autonomous, old leading families were replaced by new ones, regional divergence became dramatic, and local life commensurately more fluid—and, above all, all of the developments were generated by the end of the unity that the Roman Empire imposed on the physical space from the Persian Gulf to the Irish Sea.

With so much detail brought to bear to support such general observations, one is put mordantly in mind of Schopenhauer’s observation that “to seize the essence of history it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper.” In the beginning, there is the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the modern; at the end, there is the bewildering centrifugality of “micro-regional” detail. Getting from one to the other still seems to require taking the broad, featureless superhighway, and increasing the number of its lanes does not really make it a more interesting ride.

Wickham may well represent the perfect form of “social history as cultural history.” In so doing, though, he has brought us to the coal face: up against the limitations of this kind of history. Momigliano once wrote that the union of structural and narrative approaches to the study of the past sometimes seemed inevitable but it never actually happened. It may be possible now, with Wickham before us, to understand why. And Wickham even gives us a clue. Reflecting on the differences between regions, he concludes that they “seem best explained through differences in the behavior of aristocrats.” And how is *this* to be explained? Now we are in a place where social science cannot help us, where Braudel himself never dared to go, and where Wickham, for all his boldness, does not go either: where, as William James wrote, “the trail of the human serpent is over all.” It is the impossibility of accommodating the reality of concrete individuals into a structural or social scientific perspective that explains why Momigliano’s two modes of the antiquarian and the historical never blended, and why Braudel could never get his three layers of geological, economic, and human time to converge in the life of anyone, even the ruler of half the globe.

It is, then, perhaps the supreme achievement of Wickham’s remarkable book to reveal exactly how and where its reach may have exceeded its grasp.

Versions of a Miserabilist

One thought, from over the river: the mosquitoes
lost the smell of blood in me half way across.

Old Eden verity—I am no more to blame for my death
than I was for the sleazy rendezvous of my birth.

God alters selfish men—now that they have no face,
he has them regard the face, he teaches them how

they should have lived in a universe whose every centre is
a little pot of self-regard, a little like yours.

*

This is the end of money, though we have black fingers;
this the seedy afterlife of things. Everything poised,

as if the next step were already on stand-by:
like a star in the cavity the pilot light keeps

the steady job of incremental burning.
The meter wheel spins round and round towards

the astronomical bill that will never be paid.
These are your concerns. The fridge, my symbol,

persists in its puddle and on-off fugue. Just when
you think it is finally dead, it rambles to life.

TIM LIARDET

Braudel's *Mediterranean* has for a half-century been hailed as the great demonstration piece of twentieth-century historical scholarship. As its direct heir, both in terms of its geography and aspirations, Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* may be the last great historical work of the last century. Yet the problem of that squirming, evasive human serpent remains.

Yet there is another historian's Mediterranean that we can consider—just as gigantic, but in which individual lives provide a common unit of measurement for both micro-history and macro-framework. This is *A Mediterranean Society*, S. D. Goitein's five-volume study of the Islamic Mediterranean of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as reconstructed from the materials found at the end of the nineteenth century in the Cairo Geniza. (Interestingly, Goitein tells us that he did not know of Braudel's work until 1966 and did not bother to read it until it appeared in English in 1972, by which time he had already published his first volumes.)

Goitein's magnum opus—cited now and again by Wickham for evidence of how quickly economic life rebounded in North Africa—is divided into volumes on Economic Foundations, Community, Family, Daily Life, and, finally, the Individual. The probes within go as deep as the hundreds of thousands of Judeo-Arabic fragments permit. Goitein, like Wickham and Braudel, is all about detail. But he was never tempted by abstraction. And so, tellingly, Goitein changed the title of the final volume from *The Mediterranean Mind* to *The Individual: Portrait of a Mediterranean Personality of the High Middle Ages as Reflected in the Cairo Geniza*. He did this, he explained, “to avoid the erroneous impression that the personality emerging from the Geniza documents is regarded as representative of a hypothetical human type common to the Mediterranean area.” No ideal types for him, then. This is a *Mediterranean* that speaks in the language of human beings.

IV.

AND SO, coming back to where we began, and to the other new thousand-page study of the late antique Mediterranean, it becomes clear that it is Goitein's Mediterranean, not Braudel's, that stands behind Michael McCormick's *Origins of the European Economy*. This book—gigantic in every way—also tackles head-on the question of when and how the late Roman world ended and the “modern” one began. As

with Wickham, archaeology plays a crucial role (ceramic industry and metal production), and also material culture (the movement of coins and relics), and population dynamics (diet and susceptibility to disease). But at the heart of this project are people—a detailed prosopography of 669 individuals who are documented to have travelled in the period 300–900 C.E. Out of these particularities McCormick constructs a powerful portrait of how the Mediterranean was won. Destined to replace Pirenne, this book will also carry forward Pirenne's revolution in historical method.

McCormick's book is a masterpiece of craft—of detailed readings of texts and things, of the integration of old skills such as the study of handwriting and newfangled ones such as underwater archaeology, paleo-pollution studies (a field so new there has not been time to name it), and the use of word-searchable digital databases to identify people out of place. Layering documents atop relics and slag atop pots, he not only pinpoints the nadir of East-West communication in the Mediterranean (700–725), but also shows how very brief was this interruption before the rhythm of activity revived. Nor were the complex ties between Europe and the East purely a Mediterranean affair. Mining archaeological results with aplomb, McCormick also makes full sense of the role of the Vikings as physical intermediaries between the Iraqi Abbasids, Pagan Rusians, and Carolingian Christians.

Not only does McCormick never lose sight of the human, he also brings the archaeological and the human together—as in photos of thousand-year-old neck shackles, found in Bulgaria, worn by the human cargo who walked themselves over the Alps and down to Venice for shipment to the East. The wealth of Venice and Amalfi, the engines of Adam Smith's ninth-century “Progress of Opulence,” derived from human trafficking. The next time any of us wanders into an early Venetian church—McCormick graphs the big uptick in eighth- and ninth-century foundations as the dinars flowed in—we should remember the Slavs who were marched down to the sea in chains to finance them.

And so Wickham may be wrong to argue, in the context of attacking Pirenne and, perhaps silently, McCormick, that “historians who focus their attention on luxuries are mostly not writing economic history at all.” Actually, McCormick, like Bloch and Pirenne, is writing a different kind of economic history: “economic history as cultural history.” Wickham's rea-

sons for emphasizing the local bulk trade are noble, and they motivated the project of twentieth-century social history: getting at the conditions of the voiceless many. He may do this wonderfully well, but the price of building up a portrait of those without faces and voices is the impersonality of even the best social scientific history. If we can say that Wickham is the culmination of this strand in mid-twentieth-century historiography, we would have to conclude that McCormick has carried the best work of the early twentieth century on into the twenty-first—not just by adding more lanes, but by carving out a whole new route. And through the lens of McCormick's Mediterranean we may feel that it is Goitein's epic, and not Braudel's, that will better stand the test of time.

McCormick, like Goitein before him, reminds us that people in motion make history. When Goitein crossed the Mediterranean en route from Germany to Palestine in 1923, his fellow passenger was Gershom Scholem. When Braudel crossed the Atlantic in 1934 to take up his position at the University of São Paulo, he sailed with Claude Lévi-Strauss, on the way to his *tristes tropiques*. The first pair of travelers recovered for us whole worlds of people; the latter, whole structures of the world. In the end, human history is the story of the past that humans recognize. The sophisticated amplification devices of the modern cultural sciences—art history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, the history of religion—have done an amazing job at stretching that horizon of recognition. But there is no replacement for the human trace, and no way to grasp its meaning without a trained imagination. The Mediterranean has indeed proved its historians, and if “the great shroud of the sea rolls on as it rolled five thousand years ago,” in the last two hundred years many of its prizes have finally been brought to the surface, and many of its secrets yielded up, and the trail of that human serpent made ever more real. ♦

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