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A COMPANION TO THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Carol Lansing and Edward D. English

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Table of Contents

<u>Cover</u>

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Title page

Copyright page

Notes on Contributors

Part I: The Middle Ages

Chapter One: The Idea of a Middle Ages

Part II: Early Medieval Foundations

<u>Chapter Two: Economies and Societies in</u> <u>Early Medieval Western Europe</u>

Living through the Crisis of the Roman Empire Rome's Shadow and the Study of the Early Middle Ages Urbanism and the Economy: The Rhythms of Change A World of Villages: The Transformation of the

<u>Countryside</u>

<u>Changing Aristocracies: Wealth and Social Status</u> <u>The End of the Early Middle Ages?</u>

Chapter Three: Politics and Power

<u>Chapter Four: Religious Culture and the</u> <u>Power of Tradition in the Early Medieval</u> <u>West</u>

Some Preliminary Historiographical Observations Paganism, Christianity, and the Conversion of Europe The Threefold Liturgical Cycle Religion and Political Ideology

Part III: Populations and the Economy

<u>Chapter Five: Economic Takeoff and the</u> <u>Rise of Markets</u>

<u>Chapter Six: Rural Families in Medieval</u> <u>Europe</u>

<u>The Rural Family</u> <u>The Economy of the Rural Family</u> <u>The Culture of the Rural Family</u> <u>Conclusion</u>

<u>Chapter Seven: Marriage in Medieval Latin</u> <u>Christendom</u>

Secular Imperatives Enter the Church The Bonds of Kinship and Conjugality in the Later Middle Ages Marital Woes

Chapter Eight: Gender and Sexuality

<u>Historiography and Gender</u> <u>Patriarchies, Misogynies, Femininities</u> <u>Masculinities</u> <u>Sexualities</u> <u>Gender as Lived Experience</u>

<u>Chapter Nine: Society, Elite Families, and</u> <u>Politics in Late Medieval Italian Cities</u>

<u>Sources</u> <u>Families</u> <u>Elite Political Dynamics</u>

Part IV: Religious Culture

<u>Chapter Ten: New Religious Movements</u> and Reform

<u>The Early Middle Ages</u> <u>"Gregorian Reform"</u> The Origins of the Eleventh-Century Reform <u>Movements</u> <u>Characterizations and Evaluations of Eleventh-</u> <u>Century Reform</u> <u>New Religious Movements</u>

<u>Chapter Eleven: Monastic and Mendicant</u> <u>Communities</u>

<u>Chapter Twelve: Hospitals in the Middle</u> <u>Ages</u>

<u>Chapter Thirteen: Popular Belief and</u> <u>Heresy</u>

The Problem of Sources Belief and Skepticism Heresy Women and Gender Persecution Deconstruction

Chapter Fourteen: Jews in the Middle Ages

Jews and their Rulers Jews and Culture Sexuality and Family The Corpus Christi and its Absence

<u>Chapter Fifteen: Muslims in Medieval</u> <u>Europe</u>

Part V: Politics and Power

Chapter Sixteen: Conflict Resolution and Legal Systems

Disputes and Settlements in the Early Middle Ages Ordeals and Proof Meaning of Ordeal "Revolution" in Law *Ius commune* and *Ius proprium* Courts and Procedures English Common Law

Conclusion

<u>Chapter Seventeen: Medieval Rulers and</u> <u>Political Ideology</u>

The Two Powers Problem Dualism from Gelasius I to Charlemagne Dualism in the High Middle Ages: Papal Monarchy Opposition to the Church's Claims Political Change, the "Western Schism," and the Conciliar Movement

Chapter Eighteen: Papal Monarchy

<u>The Foundations</u> <u>The Early Stages</u> <u>Expansion</u> <u>Reaching out to the World</u> <u>The Pope as Monarch in the Church</u> <u>Chapter Nineteen: Urban Historical</u> <u>Geography and the Writing of Late</u> <u>Medieval Urban History</u>

<u>Medieval Urban History</u> <u>Cities and Towns</u> <u>Urban History Reconsidered</u> <u>Town and Country: Rethinking the City</u> <u>Urban Historical Geography: What is it?</u> <u>New Approaches</u>

<u>Chapter Twenty: Bureaucracy and Literacy</u>

<u>The Early Middle Ages (400–750)</u> <u>The High Middle Ages (750–1100)</u> <u>The Later Middle Ages (1100–1500)</u>

<u>Chapter Twenty-one: The Practice of War</u>

Overview Gathering a Force Developing a Strategy Devastation and Shadowing Skirmishes and Ambushes Assaults Siege Warfare Battle Little War and Private War Truce and Peace <u>Chapter Twenty-two: Expansion and the</u> <u>Crusades</u>

Part VI: Technologies and Culture

<u>Chapter Twenty-three: Romanesque and</u> <u>Gothic Church Architecture</u>

<u>The Problem: Historiographic Overview</u> <u>Representation and Production of Space</u> <u>Telling the Story of Romanesque and Gothic</u> <u>Conclusion</u>

<u>Chapter Twenty-four: Aristocratic Culture:</u> <u>Kinship, Chivalry, and Court Culture</u>

<u>Lineage and Kinship Structures</u> <u>Chivalry and Courtliness</u> <u>Courts, Courtliness, and Civilizing Processes</u>

<u>Chapter Twenty-five: Philosophy and</u> <u>Humanism</u>

Medieval Philosophical Humanism: Three Phases Conclusion

A Note on Petrarch

<u>Chapter Twenty-six: Philosophy and</u> <u>Theology in the Universities</u>

The Legacy of the Twelfth Century

The Journey of the Corpus Aristotelicum around the Mediterranean Thirteenth-Century Scholasticism: The New Aristotle Thomas Aquinas The Condemnation of 1277 The Nominalist Alternative Reactions to Nominalism

Part VII: The European Middle Ages

<u>Chapter Twenty-seven: Medieval Europe in</u> <u>World History</u>

<u>The Master Narrative of Academic History</u> <u>Getting away from Gibbon</u> <u>The Expansion of Civilization</u> <u>The Great Transformation</u> <u>The First Great Divergence</u>

<u>Index</u>

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A COMPANION TO THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Edited by

Carol Lansing and Edward D. English



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Part I

The Middle Ages

Chapter One

The Idea of a Middle Ages

Edward D. English and Carol Lansing

Understandings of the European Middle Ages have long been shaped by the old master narrative, in contradictory ways. The name itself was, of course, coined first by Renaissance humanists to characterize what they saw as a long stagnant, barbaric period between the cultural flowering of Antiquity and its rebirth in fourteenth-century Italy.¹ The idea was taken up by Enlightenment *philosophes*, who saw the period as one of superstitious ignorance. The term medieval is still commonly used to evoke savage barbarity; medieval scholars were amused when in Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* Ving Rhames turned on his former torturers and threatened to "get medieval" on them.²

"Medieval" continues to be associated with backwardness, darkness, indiscriminate violence. Bruce Holsinger has recently analyzed the ways in which politicians and pundits in a bizarre twist of Orientalism use the term to characterize Islamic opponents like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2006, Donald Rumsfeld, then US Secretary of Defense, said of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: "He personified the dark, sadistic and medieval vision of the future – of beheadings, suicide bombings, and indiscriminate killings."³ Some professional medievalists have echoed this approach, faintly, when they argue that the Middle Ages are best understood in terms of The Other or the grotesque.⁴

Other views of the medieval were also driven by ideology. Crucially, many of the great source collections were created in the eighteenth century by professional religious who sought to demonstrate the rationality of medieval religion while protecting the property and reputation of their contemporary Church.⁵ The emphases in those collections have profoundly shaped the field of medieval history: orderly edited sources attract the most study. Popular culture has had a variety of influences as well. With the opening of travel to a wider number of people from the midnineteenth century, Anglophone travelers and expatriates created a huge literature describing, for example, medieval and early Renaissance Italy, especially the city states, often with an emphasis on the oppressive hands of a retrogressive Catholicism.⁶ The same period – even in the United States, founded as separate from the evils of the old European regimes - saw a romantic fascination with medieval culture and architecture.⁷ The Middle Ages were popular with pre-Civil War southern aristocrats worried about honor and chivalry.⁸ Movies throughout the twentieth century brought a variety of ideas about what was medieval to popular culture. This was done complete with knights riding by the occasional telephone pole and enriched by the use of a faux dialect called "speaking medieval."⁹

Political regimes in the twentieth century recognized the value of the medieval past as a tool to legitimate themselves and also to encourage tourism. Mussolini in Italy did not just promote the cult of imperial Rome but also co-opted the Italian Middle Ages and Renaissance in spectacles and schemes to "restore" buildings and piazzas.¹⁰ In contemporary Italy, one political party claims legitimation from the medieval past by holding rallies attended by men dressed as "Lombard Knights."¹¹ The Middle Ages turned