

Marianne SÁGHY

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[A stampa in *Fifteen-Year Anniversary Reports*, a cura di M. SÁGHY, “Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU” (Central European University, Budapest), ed. by J. A. RASSON and B. ZSOLT SZAKÁCS, vol. 15 (2009), pp. 171-175 © dell’autrice – Distribuito in formato digitale da “Reti Medievali”].

MEDIEVAL PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE FALL

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Fifteen years, three-hundred ninety-three MAs one hundred fifty one PhD students, and more than fifty PhD dissertations. Statistically speaking, this is the Medieval Studies Department. Spiritually, however, much more happened in the past decade and a half in our department and in our world. How can we spell this out? When we asked sixteen alumni to tell us about the state of medieval research in their home countries and about the changes and continuities they see around them, we were interested in exploring the destinies of our craft after the fall of communism and in mapping up our alumni's integration in the new world that we are constructing. Their responses offer invigorating perspectives not only about the survival, but happily also about the revival, of medieval scholarship in Central and Eastern Europe.

As the Middle Ages are traditionally credited with ethnogenesis, state formation, the creation of national symbols and national monarchies, in the wake of the demolition of the Iron Curtain, when a series of new states emerged in search of legitimacy, the rise of a new interest in the medieval heritage was largely predictable. Redolent of past prestige, the medieval past has been used and abused in the present for purposes of ethnic self-definition and national consciousness. The recognition that the Middle Ages are yet to be "invented" in East Central Europe to serve as a future basis for an open society had contributed to the foundation of our department in 1993.

The "explosion" of Late Antiquity, the revision of ideas of decline and fall with respect to the Roman Empire conferred an added interest in the Middle Ages. An empire fell around us – how will this fact change scholarly paradigms? Will it affect our attitude toward the past? The "new" and ever "later" Late Antiquity dissolved traditional periodizations, expelled Eurocentrism, questioned the fall, replaced "crisis" with "democratization" and "decline" with "ambition," minimalized the barbarian invasions by raising the Germans to the rank of peaceful migrants, and optimized the notion of cohabitation by painting the image of an age in which different cultures and religions coexisted in great and admirable tolerance. How a society construes at any given time the evident, and in itself neutral, continuity of its history and its discourse on the past depends on what self-definition that society needs to believe in. The re-evaluation of Late Antiquity and the Middle

Ages reflected the realities and the desires, the political ideas and wishful thinking of intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century. Recently, however, this reading of the evidence has been questioned in its turn. Instead of continuity and survival, change and destruction are emphasized and crisis has made a spectacular comeback. We all know that historiography cannot be understood in isolation from the experience of contemporary history. It was time to ask: What kind of Middle Ages do post-Soviet societies cultivate? Did the disappearance of the mandatory Marxist mantra of class struggle, oppression, and exploitation entail the need to devise or adopt new interpretive frameworks and to write new narratives about Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages? Although we did not put the question in these terms to our authors, transition transpires from the following surveys of the state of medieval studies in the region.

The fall of communism is, without the slightest doubt, the foundational event of the new medieval histories of East Central Europe. The reestablishment of national sovereignty and independence in the past two decades and the process of European integration in the last five years has renewed curiosity in things medieval. The scholarly and the popular reinterpretation of the national past is in the making, often in creative chaos. “Parallel narratives” abound; old epistemologies cohabit with trendy research, dynamic theories with antiquated approaches, popular histories with academic positions, and different, if not radically oppositional, national narratives coexist in multiethnic states. “Braided histories,” however, are definitely at the door. The Middle Ages are ripe for reconceptualization East of the Elbe. Instead of defining our identity *against* the other, there is now a better chance to define ourselves *together with* the other. This is an endeavour that the Medieval Studies Department, with its international student body and faculty, has been committed to promoting from the start.

What is conspicuous in the alumni reports that we have collected for this volume is the lack of new “isms” and, as opposed to, the multiplication of new topics in East Central Europe. While official Marxism was not followed by a wholesale adoption of post-structuralism, deconstructionalism, or Foucauldism, new topics and new approaches did explode in our part of the world and in our discipline. If anything, these rapid surveys convey a sense of what it means to pluck suddenly from formerly forbidden trees. The end of communism definitely marks a watershed in the study of religion. Prohibited, denied, annihilated for many decades by communist dictatorships, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are now studied from a rich variety of aspects, involving theology, anthropology, sociology, literature, art

history, philosophy, and archaeology. The solid comeback of religion in the post-Soviet countries coincides with a worldwide renaissance of religious studies. As one of the doyens of medieval ecclesiastical history, Giles Constable notes in his recollection that while church history was strictly relegated to theological seminaries in the 1950s, now it is taught at every university. With the upsurge of religion, new scholarly communities also came to be established, such as patrological and hagiographical societies. Patrology and hagiography are among the areas in which our department has played an important role in encouraging and supporting new research regionwide.

The study of kingship, nobility, power structures and their symbolic representation are yet another set of old-new topics that have come increasingly to the fore as part of a global discourse on power as well as the chief ingredients of local, national narratives. The history of women and the history of the “other” – fundamentally “new” topics in a conservative discipline – acquired their *lettres de noblesse* in the past fifteen years and by now have become part and parcel even of “traditional” medieval research. The inclusion of Late Antiquity and Byzantium into the scope of medieval and renaissance scholarship, an important current development, keeps expanding the borders of the field and widening our scholarly perspective. “Understanding” increasingly replaces “explanation” as far as modern interpreters of the past go; scholars are more eager to evoke human experiences than to offer heavily ideological or theoretical explanations. Anthropology – be it cultural, historical, or religious – is everywhere. Well integrated into the “new” medieval studies, these novel areas and novel paradigms provoke epistemological and methodological changes in our trade, revealing a much richer medieval legacy from Asia to the Baltic, from North Africa to Scandinavia, from Spain to Syria. Looking back from where we stand, it is indeed startling to realize the headlong change between the “then” – only fifteen years ago! – and the “now.”

Language is a vehicle of culture in many and varied ways. Just as Latin, Greek, and Old Church Slavonic preserve medieval spirituality and convey medieval concerns, Anglo-American scholarship has mediated not only modern methods and bright new ideas, but also a different way of thinking, replacing previous German, French, and Russian intellectual influences in East Central Europe. While the impact of the French *Annales* school is often recognized, little is said about English and American scholarship – despite the fact that this is the single most significant cultural influence the former socialist countries experienced in the past fifteen years. As opposed to the continental “schools,” knowledge diffused in

English resists easy compartmentalization. Thus, for example, although students in the Medieval Studies Department have been heavily subjected to the reading of the works of Peter Brown, Giles Constable, Natalie Zemon Davis, Anthony Grafton and William Jordan, it would be difficult to label these scholars “the Princeton school.” Instead of school paradigms, the new generation of medievalists aims to grasp the texture of life behind the text. Medieval scholarship has proven to be a remarkably innovative intellectual art in the past fifty years. Now, with the massive influx of English learning, it may show how to be national and global at the same time, how to be part of a larger cultural *oikumene* and yet preserve its local identity. This is a task worthy of the Middle Ages, at once fiercely universalist and intensely local. To doff our identity in exchange for an “English as a second language”-type processing of the history of our country serves no purpose. To formulate our understanding of the national past for a global audience, however, is an exciting challenge.

The sixteen essays below help measure the extent of change and continuity in medieval studies in Central and Eastern Europe. Compasses in the thicket of academic and ideological changes in medieval learning in their respective countries, they offer useful information about the functioning of medieval centers from Estonia to Bulgaria, from Slovenia to Norway. Some articles present a more optimistic view, others are more level-headed about the state of the art of medieval studies. In some places, medieval studies strive and go from strength to strength; elsewhere, they are stuck in hundred-year old methods, questions, and often delusions. In certain countries, independence has brought the discovery and the recycling of the Middle Ages, in others, the loss of a nation’s past. Here, the transition from national to transnational is on the agenda, there a nation anchors its identity to the medieval centuries. It is instructive to see this landscape against an overview of German scholarship, since German learning has been traditionally influential in this part of the world. For the same reason, the absence of Russian *Mediävistik* is symptomatic in this collection. Panorama, not evaluation or critique being the purpose, these papers paint a rather irenic view of scholarship and scholarly institutions, avoiding mention of intellectual, political, or financial tensions that keep dividing the trade, such as the lack of structural and personal changes in the academia in past twenty years.

While the cultivation of national medieval history is a flourishing academic discipline in East Central Europe, this part of the world is seldom included in general dictionaries or narratives of the Middle Ages. Despite the undeniable progress of its methods and approaches, East European scholarship is still very

underrepresented in international collections. An important challenge is the integration of the new, “braided” histories of our region into the narratives and textbooks written about the medieval world to convince the readers that far from representing some peripheral eccentricity, Russians, Livonians, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Croats, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Georgians hand in hand all played a central role in the great adventure of medieval civilization.

CEU’s Medieval Studies Department has promoted the miracle of this adventure. Several articles mention the integration of our alumni into the academic structure of their home countries and their contribution to the renewal of medieval studies at home. These papers, however, were not supposed to focus on the achievement of MedStud alumni, the way they changed the world around them. We hope to ask this question fifteen years from now.