

The Yardsticks by Which We Measure Rus

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Abstract

The central question in the comparative history Rus has been its differential development vis-à-vis its western neighbours and the meaning and reasons for this difference. The recent publication by Donald Ostrowski, *Europe, Byzantium, and the "Intellectual Silence" of Rus' Culture*, is a further contribution to this debate that revisits the reasons for a differential development between Rus and medieval Europe, focussing on the intellectual contributions of the Eastern Christian Church and Latin Church to their respective spheres of influence. Ostrowski's book, along with other analogous studies, produces a regime of knowledge that shapes information about the intellectual history of Rus as diametrically opposed to that of medieval Europe. A postcolonial critique of the treatment of information about the emergence of Rus questions some of the ideas (or yardsticks) (re)produced here and suggests new critical ways to approach the study of early Rus.

Keywords

Rus – orientalism – postcolonialism – Byzantium – Europe – universality

The recently published *Europe, Byzantium, and the "Intellectual Silence" of Rus' Culture* further demonstrates the breadth of Don Ostrowski's scholarly oeuvre, that stretches in space and time from the textology of early Rus chronicles to the political and cultural history of the Mongol and Muscovite periods. This contribution to the discussion of the reception of Byzantine culture, mainly religious culture, in early Rus follows a long and wide-ranging discussion of the sites of reception, acculturation, transfer, and contact between the Byzantine

Empire and the emergent region of Rus, beginning in the tenth century.¹ Although it does not appear in this volume, *Byzance après Byzance* has been the paradigm that has often described the perceived continuation of Byzantine imperial culture (whether religious, political, or intellectual) in the centuries after the 1453 fall of Constantinople, even though the process began centuries before the Ottoman conquest of former Byzantine lands. The Byzantine inheritance, reception, or transfer of Byzantine style and culture to Rus and Muscovy has received attention and scholars have pointed to the vast array of Byzantine texts, objects, and people who eventually arrived in the European and Eurasian north in the medieval and early-modern period.² Although the title of the volume suggests an all-encompassing “intellectual silence” for the area of Rus, the majority of the text focusses on Church culture and textual production. Furthermore, the scope for comparison exceeds the area of Europe, the Byzantine Empire, and Rus. In the section entitled *Neoplatonism, East and West*, Ostrowski lays out a comparative history that reflects this genre of history-writing at its finest and most incisive. Employing a series of examples that cover Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, Ostrowski takes a global history approach that demonstrates an interconnectedness in spirituality and spiritual practices that is truly cross-cultural.

1 For a substantive discussion, see: Simon Franklin, “The Reception of the Byzantine Culture by the Slavs,” in *The 17th International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (New York: New Rochelle, 1986), 383–397.

2 This *translatio imperii* from Kiev to Moscow was developed in the sixteenth century with the shaping of information about early Rus and Byzantium (and, to a lesser extent, medieval Serbia) as a direct precursor to the nascent Muscovite principality, bypassing both the polycentric organization of the principalities of Rus’, as well as the more recent Mongol Empire. From the mid-nineteenth century, scholars in Russia began to offer an alternate vision to the theory of an unbroken and exclusive historical continuity from Kiev to Moscow. Nikolay Kostomarov postulated that Rus bequeathed a democratic heritage to Ukraine and an autocratic heritage to Russia via Muscovy, while Alexander Herzen depicted Novgorod as heir to Kiev’s communal republican tradition.

For an early, and quite substantial evaluation of this phenomenon in the fifteenth century, see: Vladimir Savva, *Moskovskie tsari i vizantiiskie vasilevtsy. k voprosu o vlianii Vizantii na obrazovanie idei tsarskoi vlasti Moskovskikh gosudarei* (Kharkov: M. Zilberberg & co., 1901), 110–157 (on inauguration); see also: Gustav Alef, *The Origins of Muscovite Autocracy: The Age of Ivan III* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1986), 90 (note 131), 206; and, for the general background to the transfer of Byzantine political culture to the north, see: Francis Dvornik, “Byzantine Political Ideas in Kievan Russia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 9 (1956): 73–121; Sergei Ivanov, “The Second Rome as Seen by the Third: Russian Debates on ‘the Byzantine legacy,’” in *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500*, eds. Przemslaw Marciniak and Dion Smythe (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2016), 55–81.

In its broad scope, several themes become clear; namely, that the overall culture of Rus is derivative (from Byzantium) and delayed – new to Rus, but old elsewhere, that the Church controlled and stifled cultural production in Rus, and that the ultimate yardstick according to which the development of Rus ought to be measured is that of Europe.³ From this perspective, the scope for the discussion of the “intellectual silence” of Rus reproduces some of the most commonly held notions about advances in the formation of Russia throughout history and, more broadly, Eastern Europe. Beyond the merits of this volume, some of which I have outlined above, I will focus on my three preceding remarks.

1 The Spectre of Isolation and Disintegration

One of the main arguments about the emergence of Rus has been its “disintegration” or “disunity”. Ostrowski mentions the arguments made by the Cambridge historian Nikolay Andreyev who described Russia as having been “cut-off” from Western Europe, in an attempt to account for the delay or backwardness of Russia’s cultural production. However, as in the studies of the scholars (predominantly text scholars) mentioned in Ostrowski’s introduction, the place of honour in the regional emergence of Rus is given to textual production. To explain the lack of “cultural production” or output, Ostrowski outlines the debate between the émigré historian and theologian Georges Florovsky and the Harvard historian James Billington who cite, respectively, the “internal crisis”⁴ and “harsh frontier conditions”⁵ that governed the emergence of Rus. Ostrowski neither accepts nor rejects these explanations for the “intellectual silence” of Rus, but the discussion bears on the further vision of Rus and Muscovy as isolated places, cut off by geography and mentality from the centres of cultural production. This vision of isolation and disunity has governed ideas about Rus and its politico-cultural formation (or lack thereof) since the last century. However, it is curious that this discussion should re-appear, as new visions of Rus and its

3 The vision of Europe presented in this volume appears restricted to the Italian Peninsula, the British Isles, and medieval France.

4 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 7–8: citing Florovsky: “We may highly cherish the legacy of Old Russian culture, and yet as historians we must take seriously the fact of its *historic ‘unsuccess,’* of its internal crisis, or its tragic dissolution and collapse.” [...] “The problem of political discontinuity... the early Rus’ principalities were decentralized, and the ruler in Kiev received allegiance from other Rus’ rulers intermittently. Much of the time the ruler in Kiev held sway over only three jurisdictions – those of Kiev, Chernigov, and Pereiaslav!”

5 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 7.

politico-cultural emergence have been and are being produced by a wide range of scholars.⁶

Between the tenth century and the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century, Rus was a region or a series of places and polities that had either ceased to exist or had not yet begun to exist. It was neither a centralized state nor a polity, rather it was a variety of states (or polities) and their dependencies, which had less and less of a connection with one another. Due to this characterization, the broad lines of thinking have tended towards disunity and decline, reflecting modern notions that well-run states tend towards monarchy or centralized administration and a coordinated foreign policy.⁷ However, the region of Rus displayed a dynastic flexibility that advantaged exploration and exploitation of new territories and, by extension, economic opportunities. The chronicles of Rus, which are not mentioned at all in this volume, described a sustained expansion and economic growth for the region of Rus. In spite of dynastic politics that were characterized as chaotic and straining to the point of incoherence, the dynasty remained intact.⁸ Furthermore, the area of Rus sustained no incursion from outside forces until the advent of the Mongols, a formidable enemy that conquered an area that stretched from China to the Balkans. And yet, the idea of the “disunity” of Rus continues to function as a specter, haunting historians of the period, causing them to attribute any perceived shortcoming of Rus to its non-centralized political organization. Current debates about nomenclature for Rus have settled on two strands, kingdoms and principalities/polities,⁹ with both capturing a significant element of the political formation of Rus: its multi-centric

6 The classical work is Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus' c. 950–1300* (London and New York: Longman, 1996). More recently, contacts between Rus and its role as a commercial platform between the Viking world and Byzantium, see: Fedir Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East: Essays on Contacts along the Road to Byzantium (800–1100)* (Uppsala University Press, 2013); *idem.*, *Images of Power: Byzantium and Nordic Coinage c.995–1035* (Kiev: Laurus, 2016). The global scope of Rus as a center for economic exchange is more fully explored in the recent volume edited by Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shepard, Monica White, *Byzantium and the Viking World* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2016).

7 Rus has often been characterized as a “stateless society”, see: Mayke de Jong and Franz Theuvs (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1–9.

8 See: Nancy Shields Kollmann, “Collateral Succession in Kievan Rus’,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 14 (1990): 377–387; Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia 980–1584* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1995] 2011), 24–64.

9 The descriptive terms for Rus have risked the danger of anachronism (federation), oversimplification (Kievan state), and obfuscation (a single kingdom), see: Christian Raffensperger, *The Kingdom of Rus'* (Amsterdam: ArcPress, 2017).

character. What is elided in the introductory remarks to the more substantive discussion of the political form of Rus in relation to its cultural output, is the complex political story of the emergence of Rus. A descriptive definition of Rus, as a non-central functioning dynastic culture and economic network with a political structure based on kinship, language, and religion, suggests both its unique character and the points of intersection with other political entities in the medieval world. To suggest that the Rus does not reflect “western” political formations is to force an overdetermined assimilation with the “west” (the Latinate kingdoms of the central Middle Ages), while overlooking the originality of its political formation and success.

Furthermore, the shaping of information about the formation of Rus, to explain the delay of its cultural or intellectual emergence is reminiscent of the historiography on the emergence of Russia. The specifics of its origin story, based on superficial readings of the Primary Chronicle (*Povest' vremennykh let*), reflect a narrow set of assumptions about ethnicity and cultural supremacy beginning from the eighteenth century and represented by the Normanist/Anti-Normanist theories.¹⁰ Questions of ethnogenesis have accompanied the orientalisng discourse about Russia and its trajectory, attributing a tendency towards autocracy to the Byzantine heritage and to the period of Mongol suzerainty (the “Asiatic character” of Russian rule) over Rus. Orientalism

10 For an overview, see Serhii Plokhyy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations. Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134–153. In his mid-eighteenth-century thesis on the origins of the people of Russia, Gerhard Friedrich Müller presented the main elements of what came to be known as the Norman Theory (Norman meaning Scandinavian in this case). He claimed that the Slavs had not settled the Dnipro region until the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian and that the Rus rulers were of Scandinavian origin (from Norway) and had conquered the Slavs. However, given the political context of the reign of Empress Elizabeth, the war between Russian and Sweden in 1741–2, Russian elites found it insupportable that they had been conquered and colonized by Scandinavians. The Russian polymath and academician, Mikhail Lomonosov, presented an alternative view of the origins of Rus, within a Russian framework. Lomonosov claimed that the name ‘Slav’ derived from the word ‘glory’ (*slava*) and traced their settlement on the Dnipro long before the reign of the emperor Justinian. Lomonosov’s views caused a shift in Russian historiography by changing the terms of the debate: it was embraced by some – especially by the later, nineteenth century Slavophiles who formed literary circles (Turgenev); artists (such as the *Peredvizhniki*); but it was rejected by others. The court elite appeared to favour a more cosmopolitan Rus (rather than a purely Slavic Rus), such as that described by the eighteenth-century historian Vasilii Tatishchev who insisted on the multi-ethnic character for early Rus.

and the construction of Rus/Russia as the “Other” has been a facet of historiography about the area of north-eastern Europe and Eurasia, articulated by early-modern travellers and modern historians alike. During the Soviet period, the question of Russian autocracy, termed as “oriental despotism” was central to explanations of the political trajectory of Rus-Muscovy-Russia-USSR. This orientalisising rhetoric shaped a narrative eternalizing culture and disregarding economic/material forces and periodization.¹¹

2 The Church as Axiomatic

The most fully-explored element of “intellectual silence” focusses on the differential development of the eastern and western Churches, and this dichotomy is taken as absolute, manifesting itself most prominently (according to Ostrowski) in dialectical reasoning. Here, dialectical reasoning is meant as a mode of argumentation, inculcated through liberal education (modelled after the Roman trivium and quadrivium), that led to analytical reasoning and the transformation of western medieval and early-modern societies via questioning and discourse. Ostrowski is not entirely clear here and does not fully take into account the great temporal and politico-cultural gap between the manifestation of this institution in Classical Antiquity and the Latinate Middle Ages. Ostrowski takes the example of the teachings of Pierre Abelard (1079–1142) in Paris as indicative of this process of discursive transformation that began with different interpretations of Neoplatonism by the Eastern and Western Churches.¹² It is difficult to analyse the validity of Ostrowski’s argument, as ample space is reserved for expounding on the merits of the intellectual/dialectical development of the Western Church (based on the example of Abelard), but the argument is somewhat restricted and circumscribed when dealing with Byzantine material.¹³ Here, the perceived absence of analogous phenomena in the Eastern Church (both in Byzantium and Rus) becomes a measure against which the Eastern Church is found lacking. Ostrowski writes:

11 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 74. The anecdote about the “eternity of time” and mystical belief rather than fact-based thinking contributes to the shaping of the oriental “Other”.

12 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 37 “...merely an outward manifestation of a deep structural difference in *mentalité* between the two Churches. That difference can be traced back to the different ways in which Neoplatonism was synthesized with Church dogma in Eastern and Western Christianity and their subsequently differing epistemologies.”

13 Ostrowski describes intellectual figures such as Psellos and Italos engaging in argumentation and teaching within the court milieu at Constantinople, but that they appear to have been reproducing recondite forms rather than producing and applying new knowledge: *Intellectual Silence*, 26.

In Paris, the analytical movement not only developed but flourished unconfined by papal or imperial repression. But then, we may ask, why did no “Abelard” develop in the outlying cities of the Byzantine Empire that were as distant from Constantinople as Paris is from Rome? Why did no such movement develop in Orthodox lands not directly under the political control of the Byzantine emperor, say in Bulgaria or in Kiev in the eleventh or twelfth centuries? And why did such a movement not occur in Novgorod, connected to the Hanseatic League and thus directly open to European influences until the end of the fifteenth century, or even in Muscovy, where independent intellectual currents began stirring in the second half of the fifteenth century?¹⁴

Ostrowski later answers this question by stating that the lack of a dialectic (“...In the Eastern Church, they did not ask “Why”...¹⁵) would have pre-empted any manifestation of an initiative to question or to develop a discursive model to tackle problems. Here, a yardstick is set up (dialectical reasoning) against which to measure the Eastern Church, and when it fails to measure up to a restricted (spatially and temporally) phenomenon, it is deemed that it was bound to fail. The dichotomy of West = Reason/East = Faith rises as an inevitability based on the author’s mode of argumentation. Thus, the intellectual trajectory stands at the place of universality, transcending the Church and spilling into society and broader culture. However, such a phenomenon is not described for the Eastern Church in relation to society. Are we to understand the lack of dialectical reasoning and intellectual paucity spilled over into the realm of politics and society in Byzantium and Rus? The section on *The Eastern Church’s Philosophical Outlook* could have been a place to explore the intersection of religious culture and society in Rus and Byzantium. Furthermore, the focussed discussion of Abelard’s oeuvre finds no homologue amongst Eastern Christian theologians. Ostrowski concludes that the we are wrong to look at religious literature as lacking or as stereotyped and clichéd (as Francis Thomson does), rather we should consider it within the scope of a culture devoted to “achievements of the soul’s intellect”¹⁶ However, were such “achievements” not also the concerns of the Western Church? Furthermore, what about other types of texts produced by the Church milieu? Ostrowski’s conclusion for this section implies that religious literature and the lack of philosophical treatises was the summum of all cultural output in Rus. However, chronicles were also produced within the Church milieu, and even though they are not entirely

14 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 37.

15 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 71–72.

16 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 83.

concerned with the soul's salvation, such texts feature interpolations from a number of biblical and exegetical sources.

One aspect of Eastern Christianity that is never addressed, is the symphony or concertation of religious and political authorities. Here, theological orthodoxy found its expression largely in the divine liturgy and was thus made known to the faithful. Political orthodoxy – articulated by the Church – incorporated theological motifs along with imperial, consular, and civic ideals (descended via a complex trajectory of influence and interpolation of classical Roman and Greek forms) and communicated them through rhetoric, both through textual and iconographic representation. In Rus, both chronicles and edifying literature contain discourses on rulership based on a Byzantine ideal. However, without the inheritance of Late Antique ideological artefacts, the Rus inherited pre-Christian ideals of rulership through references in translated Christian literature.¹⁷ An antinomy becomes apparent between Byzantine ideal rulership and local practices. The portrayal of the acts and deeds of princes – the discourse of a text like the *Pouchenie Vladimir Monomakha* (The Teaching of Vladimir Monomakh) – provides an alternate image of princely rule, one based on the practicalities of rulership in Rus. Edifying literature focusses on iconic rulership based on Byzantine ideals,¹⁸ charity, piety, and the submission of the prince to divine will. Until recently, there was a tendency to characterize Rus exclusively as a part of the 'Byzantine cultural sphere' (Byzantine Commonwealth) has often been understood as implying a derivative or passive form of development via acculturation. But, both older and more recent works have challenged this limited conception of the political culture and institutions of early Rus, to demonstrate their transcultural elements and, in particular, the similarities and, at times, connections (via contact) with Latinate kingdoms beyond the Church milieu.¹⁹

17 For example, Agapetus' treatise on ideal rulership in the *Pchela*, see: Ihor Ševčenko, "A Neglected Byzantine Source of Muscovite Political Ideology," in *Byzantium and the Slavs in Letters and Culture*, Renovatio I (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1991), 49–87, esp. 50–51.

18 Cyril of Turov made use of Barlaam and Joasaph in address to Basil Abbot of the Caves Monastery, which contained a short 6th century treatise on ideal kingship presented to Justinian I by Agapetus. The reference describes the ideal prince as adorned with a "wreath of wisdom" and adorned with the "purple robe of justice". See: Ševčenko, "A neglected Byzantine source," 48–50. The same reference to the "wreath" and the "purple robes" is ascribed to Rostislav Mstislavich in his epitaph in the Kievan Chronicle, see: *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izd. vostochnoi literatury, 1908/1962) [Hypatian Chronicle], cols. 530–531.

19 For more recent examples, see: Christian Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe. Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World* (Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Yulia Mikhailova,

The evaluation of the philosophical output of the Eastern Church and, by extension, societies in Byzantium and Rus asserts a dichotomy and the overall difference of the western (or “European”) middle ages from the contiguous period in Byzantium and Rus. To belabour the point of this difference, Ostrowski makes a distinction in the Western dialectal process that, apparently, transcends space-time and is made manifest in the reasoning of Hegel, Kepler, and Hawking who employ an “...analytical approach that has become so closely associated with Western cultural values, both religious and secular.”²⁰ And yet, why and wherefore do we (or should we) accept this claim to universality? What is the basis for the practitioners of the “Western dialectal process” to act as the measure and yardstick of universality? Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, includes a discussion of Kant’s categorical imperative in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) in which he tellingly misquotes the original:

“Kant’s maxim “act in such a way that you conduct can become a norm for all men in similar conditions” is less simple and obvious than it appears at first sight. What is meant by ‘similar conditions’? The immediate conditions in which one is operating, or the complex and organic general conditions, knowledge of which require long and critically elaborated research?”²¹

Gramsci misquotes Kant here (who wrote “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become universal law.”), but Gramsci’s analysis holds up, concluding that the reason Kant could posit himself and his behaviour as the yardstick by which universality is measured is:

“Kant’s maxim presupposes a single culture, a single religion, a ‘world-wide’ conformism... What one can say is that Kant’s maxim is connected with his time, with the cosmopolitan enlightenment and the critical conception of the author. In brief, it is linked to the philosophy of the intellectuals as a cosmopolitan stratum. Therefore the agent is the bearer of the “similar

Property, Power, and Authority in Rus and Latin Europe, ca.1000–1236 (Amsterdam: ArcPress, 2018); Talia Zajac, “Remembrance and Erasure of Objects Belonging to Rus’ Princesses in Medieval Western Sources: the Cases of Anastasia Iaroslavna’s ‘Saber of Charlemagne’ and Anna Iaroslavna’s Red Gem,” in *Moving Women, Moving Objects (400–1500)*, eds. Tracy Chapman Hamilton and Mariah Proctor-Tiffany (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019 [forthcoming]), 33–56.

20 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 70–71.

21 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 373.

conditions” and indeed their creator. This is, he “must” act according to a “model” which he would like to see diffused among all mankind, according to a type of civilisation for whose coming he is working or for whose preservation he is “resisting” the forces that threaten its disintegration.”²²

What Gramsci aptly delineates in his misquotation is that “similar conditions” are necessary to posit oneself the yardstick against which others are to be measured. Where there is difference, then the bearer of these conditions must create them.²³ Matching like with like according to a pre-fabricated set of assumptions about what constitutes the “Western” or “European” intellectual tradition posits a positive evaluation of a “Western dialectal process” eschewing its pitfalls and depredations.²⁴

Furthermore, the framing of this inheritance of dialectical reasoning as the well-spring of “Western cultural values” reflects the modern thrall to the two teleologies of the “making of Europe/the West” in the Middle Ages and the notion of “Western Universality”.

3 Europe as Axiomatic

The Slavic linguist William Veder’s assessment of Francis Thomson is that he is “addressing the problem of Old Russian culture from a Western point of view and a Western set of values.”²⁵ This point should be central in the analysis that ensues. A self-reflexive mode (or dialectic) would have been welcome especially when nebulous terms like “Western values” are being employed. However, it is clear throughout that the reader is expected to adopt the gaze of the

22 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 374.

23 For a discussion, see: Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 34–35.

24 The contradictory consequences of the Enlightenment are one avenue of querying the advancement of European imperial political thought and action, based on the ethical and intellectual progress of the Enlightenment, see: Nikita Dhawan (ed.), *Decolonizing Enlightenment. Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World* (Berlin: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2014). Of course, the methods of imperialism were questioned from within and this could be characterized as a “dialectal process”, see: Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 4–13. Thus, it was only during the period of decolonization that a true dialectic developed, a radical departure both in the discursive possibilities about difference, but also in the “dialectal process” itself, see (one example of many): Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 10–34.

25 Ostrowski, *Intellectual Silence*, 2.

Western-educated scholar/traveller; throughout, the reader is the seventeenth-century traveller, Samuel Collins, remarking the ignorance of the Eastern cultural artefacts that he encounters. Ostrowski's analysis of this anecdote is telling. Rather than taking a constructivist approach to unpacking the role of prejudice and bias in travel-writing (which is a near-universal fact of medieval and early-modern travel literature, see: Ibn Fadlan or Afanasy Nikitin), Ostrowski takes this as a meaningful statement that reflects some deeper truth about the Russian relationship with Truth.

In one of the key historical analyses of pre-modern "colonialism" and "colonialist attitudes" within medieval western Europe, Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change 950–1350* (1993), the nascent "Europe" (really, western Europe) is an area of deep ethno-religious divisions and open hostilities, acting as precursors to nineteenth century imperialism and twentieth century wars. Bartlett traces this by creating a series of oppositions, centre/periphery, Latin Christianity/everything else, monotheism/paganism, indigenous/settler, active Norman/passive Byzantine, Latin expansion or colonialism/pagan raiding. Bartlett imposes a certain limit on "Europe" (which he terms as "Romano-Germanic"), excluding the Byzantine Empire and the Byzantine cultural sphere along with all of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, as well as North Africa. The staging of Bartlett's "Europe" creates a politico-territorial space (accompanied by qualifiers such as "dynamic Germanic peoples" and "evasive Byzantine emperors")²⁶ upon which an ideological and territorial limit is set and which structures our understanding of the medieval world as one of alterity, between the West and the East. This alterity implies a hierarchy, structures information *from within* the dynamic, colonialist West of the Germanic peoples, entirely omitting information about any similar occurrences beyond this circumscribed sphere.²⁷ In the staging of the nascent Europe, Bartlett inadvertently created a "regime of knowledge" that obfuscated the diversity of the broader medieval world and its internal dynamics while ascribing agency and dynamism solely to a single region. The

26 Note the shaping of information, by Bartlett, of East vs. West: "Catholics confronted Muslim (and Greek) societies which were at least as wealthy, as urbanized and as literate as their own. While those they faced were abhorrent to them on grounds of religious belief, they were adherents of monotheistic, scriptural, revealed and [...] non-idolatrous religions. This fundamental distinction between the Mediterranean Muslim and the European pagan had important consequences for both the actual process of conquest and conversion and the intellectual and doctrinal position of the Church."

27 Bartlett: "The first major consequence is the fact that in northern and eastern Europe conversion to Christianity could be seen as one aspect of a wider reorientation or, more precisely, 'occidentation', a shift towards the ways and norms of Romano-Germanic civilization [...]" (pg. 295)

Oxford medieval history, Chris Wickham, noted in his review of the work the triumphalism in the description of Germanic (western European) peoples and their technologies in settling the frontier zone of the European east while avoiding mention of resident populations and their reckoning with the environment prior to the encroachment of Germanic settlers.²⁸

At present, western medieval historians are looking to a postcolonial turn from within their field. In part, they are doing this to neutralize the instrumentalization of their objects of study for ethno-national political aims. One of the imperatives stated by Jeffrey Cohen in his introduction to the volume on *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* is to “Decenter Europe”, stating that “a post-colonial Middle Ages has no frontiers, only heterogeneous borderlands with multiple centers. This reconfigured geography includes Asia, Africa, and the Middle East not as secondary regions to be judged from a European standard... but as full participants in a world...”.²⁹ To a large extent, the inability to de-center knowledge, away from the centrality of western European sources and intellectual structuring, is a result of the academy itself. Robert Erwin pointed out an analogous structuring of knowledge when European scholars:

“began to compile the first grammars of the Arabic language they tended to try to model their works on Latin grammars. Historians who studied the rise and fall of the Arab Caliphate tended to model their narratives upon that of Gibbon in his *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The East India Company exams placed stress on the candidate's ability to translate Homer, Herodotus, Cicero, and others. The history of the Roman Empire served as a briefing for the governance of the British Empire. [...] The Classical literature of Greece and Rome provided the yardsticks by which all Oriental literatures were judged. [...] Even in the twentieth century R. A. Nicholson sprinkled his *Literary History of the Arabs* (1907) with references to Homer, Lucian, Herodotus and Tacitus.”³⁰

Therein lies the fundamental problem of the yardsticks by which one evaluates historical legitimacy and worth: they sustain a system of received ideas and knowledge rather than question it.

28 Chris Wickham, “Making Europes,” *New Left Review* 208.1 (1994): 133–143.

29 Jeffrey Cohen (ed.), *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 12–14.

30 Robert Irwin, “The real discourses of orientalism,” in *After Orientalism. Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Reappropriations*, eds. François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 18–30, esp. 20–21.