



The Civilization of the Middle Ages

Norman F. Cantor

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Now revised and expanded, this edition of the splendidly detailed and lively history of the Middle Ages contains more than 30 percent new material.

The Civilization of the Middle Ages Details

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From Reader Review The Civilization of the Middle Ages for online ebook

Sabrina Spiher says

Let me start by saying that this book was a bit daunting. At 566 pages, it's not the longest book I've ever tackled by far, but it may be one of the densest. Every page was literally crammed with information.

I'm a big fan of the one-volume history. I like to know a little bit about everything, but I don't like to get too intensive about much. I also don't enjoy the overly scholarly. Cantor's *Civilization* is a pretty perfect fit for these criteria: his prose is very "readable" for someone basically unfamiliar with his subject matter, he's obviously knowledgeable, and he gives an overview of more than 1,000 years of Western Civilization in 566 pages.

The thing is, despite my earlier statement, my complaint about the book is that there's just SO MUCH in it that it became very difficult to retain much of what I was reading. It took me quite a while to finish the thing, first of all, because its density of information makes it slow reading. The effect was that I actually forgot or confused a goodly portion of what I read, say, a given 150 pages ago. This was problematic because history, of course, is built in layers, and so what happened 150 pages before is crucial to understanding what happens 75 pages later.

The solution, I think, might actually have been two or three books by Norman Cantor, say, "The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages" accompanied by "State, Nation, and Monarchy in the Middle Ages." I would have read both of these books, and they might have allowed for a clearer, more exclusive focus on each subject while still permitting glances at the obvious interweaving of each.

That having been said, the prose was, as I said, very enjoyable for a history, and the subject matter was intensely interesting, despite the way its mass was difficult to contain in its volume. I would recommend this book to someone who already knows they like reading about history and are willing to concentrate on a hefty book, but not to say, a first-time history reader.

David Withun says

I disagree with some of the conclusions that Cantor draws, I think that he a little too often states as fact what is really conjecture or a best-guess, and I wish that he had actually taken the time to give citations on many of his more controversial statements. In spite of these rather significant drawbacks, however, I was impressed with Cantor's work here. Though these flaws are not to be overlooked or lightly dismissed, I have not seen any work comparable with this one in its scope and style. Cantor covers a huge, complex, and often controversial swath of history, from the seeds of the Middle Ages in the early Roman Empire and the nascent Christian Church all the way through to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation and the Age of Exploration in the 16th century. And he does this in a style that I think even those who don't have quite the love for history that I possess would be able to appreciate: as a narrative and flow of events rather than disconnected names and dates.

John-andrew says

I'm re-reading this book because my own personal interest in Medieval Europe, since I'll be studying for my doctorate in the subject. Anyway, it's a solid, well-written, overview of Medieval Europe (one reviewer remarked that it's eurocentric, apparently oblivious to the fact that the book is specifically about European civilization). I'm still partial to Durant and primary source material, but this is a solid work packed with information. The dates for the Middle Ages vary, since certain countries underwent their respective Renaissance at different times. Cantor uses generalized dates.

As with any book on history, it's always smart to read as much primary source material as possible. While Cantor's bibliography is extensive, I don't see any primary source material (ie. Medieval documents, Church documents). Normally, this raises a red flag when I read a book on history. But, in this case, Cantor hits the usual suspects in his overview of Medieval civilization, which doesn't necessitate any deeper evaluation of early documents or writings.

Again, as far as an overview of his subject, Cantor's work is worth reading. It's ideal as an undergraduate survey textbook to introduce students to the important themes of the epoch. It's also worthwhile to the casual reader interested in European history. I like that Cantor includes reading lists for those who seek more information and different perspectives.

Jennifer says

A thorough if sometimes tedious book about medieval Europe. Cantor's scholarship is sound. His writing is accessible but not the easy-to-digest style he perfects in such later book as "In the Wake of the Plague" and "Antiquity."

I have two complaints.

First, there are no maps or photos of any kind and the book suffers because of it. Modern maps do not represent the heavily forested, mostly rural Europe of the Middle Ages. Photos of the documents produced by monks in the scriptoria would have been appreciated. Likewise, I wanted to see the coins, the sacred structures and the iconography described at length by Cantor. The lack of any graphics renders this book incomplete.

Second, and this is a minor complaint, Cantor occasionally gets lazy with his pronoun usage. I found myself having to re-read certain sentences several times to decipher who "he" was.

If you are a college student and you need to write a paper on some aspect of the Middle Ages, this is the book for you (but be prepared to get your maps somewhere else.)

Rhesa says

Compelling reading and first class treatment of medieval civilization, the author painstakingly address every

possible angle in the study of medievalism, from the influence of Greek, Judeo-Christian until Islam's culture that has formed and reformed the multiple faces of middle ages. Also he discuss the crusade factor in political middle ages and the contour of scholasticism that later gave birth to european enlightenment.

This book is simply a must , I wouldn't classify myself as cultured man until the day I finish the last page of this book.

Dennis Bartel says

Fascinating history of Europe from fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. Written with clarity, and without much bias. Even highly controversial topics such as the Crusades and Inquisition, Cantor avoids either haranguing or defending, simply provides context and background. Would give it a higher rating but it doesn't really transcend its genre, by that I mean that there's not much reason to read it unless you have a particular interest in medieval history.

Lora says

I rather enjoy the college reading atmosphere as well as Cantor`s exhaustive research. I hit some hidden sand bars as I was sailing along over his deep historic seas. The first was when he hinted broadly at Jesus Christ treating prostitutes as his equals as signs that he had been intimate with them (her). Sorry, but a john doesn't treat a prostitute as an equal, and really, this is the Savior of the world we're talking about here, so thanks, Cantor, for the cheap swipe. The second was when Cantor complained for several paragraphs about the uselessness of Anglo Saxon law as compared to those really refined absolute rulers and their glossy empires. Then as an afterthought he tosses out a "oh, the Anglo Saxons did give us a form of rule by the people, but that`s about it". Really? Seriously?

His research is exhaustive; his deeply prejudiced assumptions are exhausting. Maybe I'll get back to this later, when I feel like writing more notes in the margins of a book.

I'm coming back to amend this. I reread the passages about Christ and I see things more clearly this time around. I read this, initially, after plowing through another history on the Middle Ages that was very much caught up in the sexual details and sin of many Catholic leaders of the time. It seemed to have a chip on its shoulder about trying to discredit Christianity entirely because of the sins of some powerful leaders. I say seems because I get a chip on my shoulder, too. I've had professors and read authors who wanted to take Christ down a peg or two. I went into Cantor's passages with all that in mind. I can still see where I could get a bit worried because of the way this is brought up, but for complete accuracy and for my own future reference, I'm posting an entire paragraph here:

"Ambrose also had a great influence on the attitude of the Christian church toward love and sexuality. This was an important, difficult question, and the early church waited a long time to take a stand on it. The earliest Christians were often accused of holding "love feasts" (although that may have been a slander), and certainly Jesus himself was free and open with women, particularly with "fallen women". He treated prostitutes as his equals- most uncommon in the Roman world- and some of his most devoted disciples were women of the streets. A censorious attitude toward women entered the Christian world of thought with St. Paul, who favored celibacy despite his admission that it is better to marry than to burn. Was sexual love a Christian experience, the fulfillment of the human personality and an expression of divine love, or an instrument of the devil? The church did not really make up its mind until the fourth century, when Ambrose (and Augustine) threw their weight on the side of Paul."

He goes on for a few paragraphs exploring this. He does mention that the early Catholic church had to fight hard against the hypersexualized Roman world. I think some of my resistance to reading this passage as clearly as I could have is related to the same kind of issue in the culture around me now. It is hypersexualized and often nearly rabidly anti-Christian at times. I think I may have been defensive and over reacting because I expected the same treatment that I have encountered before. But because someone discusses a topic does not mean they are on the offense. It can be difficult to tell at times.

So while Cantor does not advocate outright the idea that the Savior had illicit relations, he does examine it. And to my reading, I often wonder why people bring it up. Yes, it's one thing to discuss sexuality and the role of women within a historical period. It's another to continually return to the slander and risk giving it the patina of real belief. You know the saying: repeat something often enough and people will begin to believe it. I've come across that particular mistaken notion far too often in historical books, and I think I started to have a kneejerk reaction to it.

Many times when I read about the horrors of the Catholic church in its earliest history, I forget that this is, in my belief system, a very fallen Christianity. In our religion (the LDS church) we call it the Apostasy. This time period is also known as the Dark Ages. They had lost true priesthood, changed most doctrines, and lost their way even from their own beliefs as they moved from difficult century to difficult century.

Over all, looking over the entire paragraph, I can see how a reader like I was at the time could read it and become defensive. I also read it differently now and see it within the context of about two or three pages with a more fully developed thought process. And I want to stand for truth no matter what, even if I am the one who got confused.

Howard says

A great introduction to the period. He's a cranky, cantankerous guy, and he doesn't hesitate to take swipes at other historians, but it's part of the entertainment. You'll get a thorough grounding in the all aspects of the time, both the traditional concerns of history, like wars and economics, but also lifestyles and particularly internal church history. Maybe not to everyone's taste, but if you like this sort of thing, well, you'll like it.

Spike Gomes says

I purchased "The Civilization of the Middle Ages" back when I was in high school from a long defunct mall Waldenbooks. I vaguely remember reading it then, but not having the adequate knowledge base for much of what it discusses to truly sink in. Recently, since I have all the time in the world now in which to read (and not much money for the purchasing of new books), I decided to give it a second go-round.

Cantor's style is very interesting, sort of a combination between history written for a popular audience, and history written for an academic audience. For an educated well-read person who is not a specialist on the area, it is engaging, interesting and filled with color commentary from the author. Unlike most popular histories, it also dives deep into the intricacies of certain areas, all while maintaining the sort of general history overview one would expect from a book published for the popular market. It is interesting that Cantor has such an uneven reputation for his scholarship amongst medievalists, while at the same time being required reading for so many undergraduate classes on the subject. Interesting, but completely understandable. He has many strong opinions on most areas of the subject, and certainly doesn't express them in a manner congenial to modern academia of the histories.

While the book is an overview, one quickly realizes that Cantor's primary forte is the history and development of governmental, financial and ecclesiastic institutions and practices, the codification of secular and canon law, with a secondary emphasis on the development (or often in this case, rediscovery) of classical philosophy, learning and statecraft. As such, some areas get the short shrift. Military history is glossed over fairly quickly, outside of how it related to political and religious developments, and one gets the distinct notion that Cantor finds war craft and those that practice it somewhat distasteful. In the same way, the arts are given a short shrift compared to the long discussions of how legal institutions were developed and taxes collected. The coverage of literature is adequate, if somewhat idiosyncratically commented on, while the material arts only get a short section on architecture and some notes on the Renaissance. Popular religious devotion gets short and passing theoretical coverage, despite it being so key to tenor of the times, and music gets one short paragraph, despite the time period being essential in the origins of modern music theory.

It is perhaps best that he didn't speak at length too much outside his academic wheelhouse, because I found two glaring errors when he briefly mentioned the development of food and drink, which is something that I do know well. He asserts that medieval beer was higher in alcohol than modern beer, when the opposite was true. He also asserts, quite oddly, that the basic principles of French and Italian cuisine were in place by the late Middle Ages. How he misses that the Columbian agricultural package utterly transformed how and what people ate, is beyond me. Likely there are other such flaws when he discusses things far outside his specialties, but in the grand scheme of things, it's all small beer, relatively speaking.

What is far more important is that he covers important areas people usually give very little thought to. How property disputes were handled and taxes gathered are of far greater importance to historical development than idealistic post hoc impositions of knights errant and dirty superstitious serfs. In this book we are given a clear picture of how and why the Western Roman Empire collapsed, how society slowly recovered, flourished, and developed into the cradle that became our modern world, right up to the epochal turning that was the discovery of the New World and the Protestant Reformation. That alone is worth the cost of admission.

Perhaps for the academically minded, his wide all-encompassing spread, his endless bon mots at the cost of professional tone, his cantankerous asides on modernity and other scholar's writings, his armchair psychologizing of historical figures, and his partial adherence to the out of style "great man" theory of history is too disconcerting and old school to be dismissed. As for myself, I found it charming, entertaining, and a good antidote to the dry, laser-focused and overly-citationed academic style that's lately been infecting popular history books as well. You don't have to write like a robot in order to be illuminating. That said, one should not solely rely on this book as a guide to the times, however, it should be on the short list of essential reads.

4.5 out of 5 stars.

Mel says

I enjoyed reading this book but would only recommend it to people who have a serious interest in knowing about the Middle Ages and/or history nerds. (I sometimes can't believe I was that person who hated history in high school and college since I love it now.)

Reading this behemoth of a book sucked up almost a month of my time and the pages are filled with notes, various scribbles and underlines. I am very glad I will not be tested on the subject as sadly I already know I am not going to retain even half of it. Glad I have read it but it was a ton of work. What an excellent

fascinating read. I felt like I took a survey course on the Middle Ages and I hope I will remember some of the wonderful information contained in this book. It took me a while to complete this massive book and I was elated when I finished it but I consider it time well spent. 4 stars and going on my best reads pile.

Nell Bergman says

A balanced, informative book. I keep going back to it, it's a permanent 'installation' in my life now :-) I am sure there are other good books on the subject, but this one stuck with me. I have it in paper form. Nice, heavy, pages packed with small print, just the way I like it. :-) Definitely give it a go.

Alex Shrugged says

I just finished "The Civilization of the Middle Ages" by Norman F. Cantor and it was pretty good. It is concise and to the point. It mentioned everything I wanted to know. I am not always sure if I was getting everything I needed to know but it was good nevertheless.

The author comes to conclusions rather than simply reciting facts. He called King Philip the IV of France simple-minded and that would explain many of the things he did during his reign.... like killing Pope Boniface VIII for example or burning the Grand Knight Templar at the stake, or condemning two of his daughters to life in prison.... stuff like that. He also mentioned how the Jews were faring during this time which is an interest of mine since I'm Jewish.

I bought the book so that I could look things up but a straight through reading went very well. I was actually afraid it would be boring reading it that way but my fears were unfounded.

That's it. It had a reasonable tune and I could dance to it. :-)

William Ramsay says

The book listed here is an update to the one I actually read, which is probably the book's first edition, purchased and first read in 1965. The reason I reread it is twofold; one I have been reading mostly mind candy thrillers and, two, I have always considered this one of my favorite books. It still is. Cantor was one of the pioneers of bringing the middle ages out of the dark ages. It's amazing the number of cultural foundations we take for granted that were begun in the middle ages - the university system, law, most of religion - the list goes on. Life was hard and cruel, but it was a period of deep religious faith. Cantor makes it all very interesting.

It was good to read something substantial. I needed that before tackling The Lost Symbol, which tries to convince us that the ancients knew secrets we are not capable of handling. I wonder what Cantor would have thought of such a ridiculous idea!

Charles Lewis says

I'm finished. I'm embarrassed that there is such a big gap in my knowledge about this period. What should have been obvious to me is that there can be no understanding of the Middle Ages, at least in Europe, without knowing the evolution of the Catholic Church post-Constantine.

One small complaint: why is the type so tiny! That's why more and more I'm buying books on Kindle. I love holding a book but I hate squinting for hours at a time. And yes I do wear reading glasses and had my eyes checked recently. I ended up reading *The Brothers Kamarazov* on a Kindle for the same reason.

Jacob Aitken says

While most readers simultaneously love-hate Norman Cantor, even among his bitter critics he is considered a master in the field. In delineating the time frame of the middle ages, Cantor doesn't buck the standard trend that the Middle Ages began in the Barbarian invasions of Rome and ended in 1500. At the same time, though, he pleads for a hearing of other scholars' time lines (usually ending somewhere between 1200 and 1300).

It is difficult to analyze a standard survey work; most cover the same time periods and the same events. Cantor, however, focuses on a number of loci: the interplay between Roman and German law; the nuances of theology upon life, and the changes thereof; and many fascinating connections between medieval life and today.

For Cantor there is a subtle interplay between Latin law/culture and German law/culture (146ff). While much of this narrative is more pertinent to the ideology behind the Inquisition, what it meant for early Middle Ages was the centrality of govt against village-oriented govt. Strong central governments, while providing security and cohesion, often came at the price of corruption. Conversely, a weak govt meant greater freedom but more open to hostile neighbors (e.g., Germany until Bismark). The ancient Germanic principle was that law belongs to the community (316).

For Cantor the defining moment of the Middle Ages is the Gregorian Revolution (247). In his words it was a proto-Puritanical reformation of Catholic morality, but in a way cracked the olde Medieval moment. A form of this, though very indirect, is seen in the Norman conquest of England. (And I am not suggesting a 1:1 correlation between Gregory and Norman England). While strengthening the English "state," it did so by abandoning ancient principles of kingship (277ff).

Surprisingly, Cantor gives very competent discussions of medieval theology (Most people who write on this have no clue what they are discussing). While I cringed at a few generalities, I was impressed particularly (no pun intended) with his section on universals and the nominalism debate (334ff).

There are a few drawbacks to this book, though none that are particularly Cantor's fault. While the early sections of the book (and also on the Crusades), Cantor fully develops early Byzantine history into his narrative, the book is more of a History of Western Middle Ages; the Byzantist will be disappointed.

The strengths of the book more than cover the faults.
