



German
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London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

REVIEW ARTICLE

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to the Global Middle Ages

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German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIV, No. 1 (May 2022), 52–66

ISSN 0269-8552

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BETWEEN CHICHÉN ITZÁ, BAGHDAD, AND GUANGZHOU: NEW APPROACHES TO THE GLOBAL MIDDLE AGES

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JOHANNES PREISER-KAPPELLER, *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Großen: Aspekte der globalen Verflechtung in der langen Spätantike, 300–800 n. Chr., Expansion, Interaktion, Akkulturation: Globalhistorische Skizzen*, 32 (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2018), 292 pp. ISBN 978 3 854 76554 7. €19.90

VALERIE HANSEN, *Das Jahr 1000: Als die Globalisierung begann*, trans. Anna Leube and Wolf Heinrich Leube (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020), 393 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 75530 9. €28.00; first published as *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (London: Penguin, 2020)

CATHERINE HOLMES and NAOMI STANDEN (eds.), *The Global Middle Ages, Past & Present Supplements*, 13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxii + 441 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 83750 3. Open access at [https://academic.oup.com/past/issue/238/suppl_13]

JÖRG OBERSTE and SUSANNE EHRICH (eds.), *Italien als Vorbild? Ökonomische und kulturelle Verflechtungen europäischer Metropolen am Vorabend der 'ersten Globalisierung' (1300–1600)*, *Forum Mittelalter: Studien*, 16 (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2019), 208 pp. ISBN 978 3 795 43449 6. €34.95

Globality is in vogue. The fact that this impression holds true not only for our modern world, but also for discourses in historiography, is attested by the multitude of publications relating in one way or another to the field of world history. While earlier discourse was pre-occupied with the question of whether such a global perspective was a

‘Chimera or Necessity’¹ the debate has since turned in numerous other directions, taking in terminological aspects as well as the question of whether supposedly well-established periodizations distinguishing, from a mainly Eurocentric perspective, between ‘antiquity’, the ‘Middle Ages’, and an ‘early modern age’ should be reassessed.² Even though scholarly debates on such questions are still in full swing, there is an academic consensus that human interactions in the so-called ‘Middle Ages’ were in no way confined to local relations between kings, nobles, clerics, and other parts of primarily European societies. Rather, these groups often engaged in far-reaching and complex networks connecting not only Europe and the medieval Mediterranean, but large parts of Africa, Eurasia, and East Asia as well. These networks can only be understood properly if they are studied from a more flexible, balanced, and non-Eurocentric perspective, taking into account that the partners interacting with European protagonists themselves took part in complex systems of communication and exchange with other parts of the world, in which Europe was merely on the periphery. But what exactly can be considered ‘global’ in the medieval millennium, and when can it be attested at the earliest? Scholars tend to answer such questions, if at all, rather diversely. While the overall development of this field of research is far too complex to be treated in brief, this review article seeks to present and compare four recent publications that are equally ambitious in their approaches and that received considerable publicity. How do their findings contribute to our perception of the concept of the global Middle Ages?

Johannes Preiser-Kapeller’s monograph *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Großen* was published in 2018 and has received quite a number of reviews—mostly in German, but also in Italian, English, and other languages.³ During his early career, Preiser-Kapeller focused mainly on

¹ See the call for papers for a workshop headlined ‘World History Today – Chimera or Necessity’, held in Leipzig on 12–14. Feb. 1998, *H-Soz-Kult*, 7 Jan. 1998, at [<http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-51100>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

² Cf. Tillmann Lohse, ‘Review Symposium zu J. Preiser-Kapeller, *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Großen*’, *H-Soz-Kult*, 25 Mar. 2019, at [<http://www.hsozkult.de/text/id/texte-4703>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

³ An overview can be found at [<http://www.univie.ac.at/VSIG/site/2018/02/jenseits-von-rom-und-karl-dem-grosen>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

Byzantine history, but he has subsequently engaged with wider topics such as environmental and climate history, as well as global history. Pertaining mainly to the latter field, *Jenseits von Rom* concentrates on the so-called ‘long late antiquity’, a relatively new research concept comprising the period between around 200 and 900 CE. According to the author, these centuries have for a long time been perceived, at least from a Western European or Mediterranean perspective, mainly as a period in which the political and economic networks maintained under Roman rule fell apart almost entirely. In contrast to this view, Preiser-Kapeller aims to switch the centre of attention from Europe to the eastern Mediterranean, East Africa, the Near East, the Indian sub-continent, and Central and East Asia. In these parts of the world, the third to seventh centuries CE also witnessed the collapse of several major empires, but these were replaced by new and sometimes even larger ‘imperial formations’ (p. 13). In this ‘Afro-Eurasian late antiquity’ (p. 14), the author discerns global entanglements between political and economic centres and aims to contrast their dynamics with the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ in Western Europe before the European expansion.

In his short and rather anecdotal introduction, Preiser-Kapeller describes his book as a series of six ‘global historical sketches’ (p. 10) rather than a study as comprehensive as Michael McCormick’s *Origins of the European Economy*, for example.⁴ In contrast to this understatement, these ‘sketches’ or chapters, roughly equal in length and based on both primary sources and research literature, open up a truly extensive panorama of countless events and developments centred on several core topics. In this context, a detailed index of names and places would have been very helpful, although ten rather plain maps provide some (at least elementary) orientation.⁵

The first chapter focuses on political developments on the macro level, which the author presents as ‘rhythms of imperial formations’ (p. 13). These rhythms, marked by the formation and decline of larger

⁴ Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁵ This has also been criticized by Arnaldo Marcone, ‘Review of: Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Großen*’, *Sehepunkte*, 19/2 (2019), 15 Feb. 2019, at [<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2019/02/32061.html>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

political entities, are traced in more or less chronological order from around 500 BCE to 900 CE. Although the sheer quantity of developments is necessarily reduced to major outlines, a number of subheadings serve as a guide through the wider trends discerned by the author, such as 'the crisis of the "old" empires' (p. 18), the rise of 'new superpowers' (p. 38), and the 'decay' of empires in the ninth century (p. 57). The second chapter delves into the complex relations between the different political entities, tracing diplomatic interactions and rivalries. Another important topic is the question of mobility and competition between elites within a single political entity, which the author presents via the examples of China, the early Islamic Caliphate, and the South Caucasus. In the third chapter, Preiser-Kapeller studies processes of exchange within the religious sphere, focusing on the spread of Buddhism, the persistence and expansion of Christianity, and their respective repercussions on political developments.

The fourth chapter then leaves the political-religious elites to examine social groups on lower levels, tracing mobility and exchange among merchants, artists, artisans, enslaved people, and others. Chapter five goes even further by focusing on the 'mobility' of animals and plants, who were involuntary participants in commercial and diplomatic exchange between different world regions and cultures. The ecological consequences of these man-made changes connect this chapter to the last thematic section, which deals with the impact of climatic conditions on political and socio-economic developments.

In a short conclusion, Preiser-Kapeller summarizes the main points of his study: the phenomenon of global entanglement in the 'long late antiquity' can be perceived as overlapping and interdependent networks 'between places, persons, and objects' (p. 251). These networks survived the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century and became more complex over time. In other world regions too, empires collapsed. However, these were replaced by even bigger formations such as the Islamic Caliphate in the west and the Tang Empire in the east, to name but two. Although these new powers were by no means as interdependent as the parts of the former Roman Empire, they were connected through overlapping and complex networks of which the post-Roman west was a part as well. Yet rulers like Charlemagne or the popes in Rome who claimed control

over this post-Roman west stood not at the centre of a much larger Afro-Eurasian system, but merely at its periphery – a situation which persisted until the Industrial Revolution around 1800.⁶

Although some of the countless processes and events touched upon may have deserved a more detailed and critical analysis based on the primary sources available, *Jenseits von Rom* is a remarkable synthesis which contributes to several historiographical trends because it picks up the concept of the ‘long late antiquity’ and extends it impressively to an Afro-Eurasian context, including findings from the natural sciences as well.⁷ This broad scope almost necessarily entails complex problems, like the question of the extent to which we can really apply a period like the ‘long late antiquity’ to East and South-East Asia,⁸ or whether imperial power was as crucial to the processes of entanglement as suggested.⁹ In other responses to Preiser-Kapeller’s conclusions, it has furthermore been argued that the post-Roman west might not have been as peripheral as the author suggests to his Afro-Eurasian system, which he studies from a rather eastern-oriented perspective.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Preiser-Kapeller’s study is worth reading, not only because of its impressive scope and approach, but also due to its style, through which the author makes his findings accessible to academics, students, and enthusiasts alike.

Another book not unlike Preiser-Kapeller’s has recently been published by the American scholar Valerie Hansen. Originally a sinologist, Hansen has also worked on the history of the Silk Road and

⁶ On the concept of the so-called ‘Great Divergence’, cf. e.g. Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev, *Great Divergence and Great Convergence: A Global Perspective* (Cham, 2015).

⁷ Cf. the reviews by Mischa Meier, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 309/2 (2019), 470–2; by Wolfram Drews, *Das Mittelalter*, 25/2 (2020), 450–2; and by Lutz Berger in the aforementioned Review Symposium on *H-Soz-Kult*, 3 Apr. 2019, at [<http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-27510>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

⁸ This question has already been addressed in the negative critique by Marcus Bingenheimer in the Review Symposium on *H-Soz-Kult*, 4 Apr. 2019, at [<http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-27512>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

⁹ This has been pointed out in the review by Philipp Winterhager, *English Historical Review*, 134 (2019), 943–5.

¹⁰ Stefan Esders in the Review Symposium on *H-Soz-Kult*, 5 Apr. 2019, at [<http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-27511>], accessed 13 Nov. 2021.

of globalization. Her study *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (translated into German as *Das Jahr 1000: Als die Globalisierung begann*) has likewise received mixed reviews. She takes a different approach to Preiser-Kapeller, one that is narrower in time but wider in space. Her study aims to demonstrate that the year 1000 (or rather the centuries around it) marked the beginning of globalization, originating not in Europe, but in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, which in that period began to be connected by a global system of ‘pathways’.

After a prologue containing several short anecdotes that illustrate the main concerns of the book, the reader is presented with eight chapters of more or less equal length. The first of these serves as a more comprehensive introduction, providing an overview of the world in (or rather, around) the year 1000 and touching on many of the topics addressed in more detail later on. After that, Hansen delves into specific themes. In chapter two, she traces the Viking expeditions into the North Atlantic as well as their settlements in Newfoundland and possibly New England, both of which are generally dated to the eleventh century. The third chapter follows up by discussing the possibility of further Viking voyages as far south as Chichén Itzá in modern-day Mexico, essentially relying on Mayan wall paintings depicting fair-haired captives and ships resembling Viking traditions.

In the fourth chapter, Hansen leaves the Americas for North-Eastern Europe, where the empire of the Kievan Rus reached its greatest extent in the mid eleventh century and served as an intermediary between Byzantium, Central Asia, and Northern Europe. Hansen focuses mainly on religion and the economy, citing the introduction of Orthodox Christianity and of silver coinage as her main examples. Chapter five takes the reader south to the Near East and North Africa. Here too, Hansen focuses mainly on economic aspects, highlighting the significance of these regions in supplying large parts of the ‘Old World’ with enslaved people and gold.

In the next section, Hansen gradually moves her perspective towards the east. Chapter six deals with North and Central Asia, which are treated from different angles. Besides the importance of trade networks and their dependence on political conditions, the author stresses the significance of the religious sphere, with Buddhism and Islam

eventually dividing Central Asia into two parts. Chapter seven takes a two-pronged approach by concentrating first on the human settlement of Oceania and then on South Asia, where the main developments are once again examined from economic, religious, and political perspectives. The last chapter takes Hansen to her main field of research: thanks to her expertise in Chinese history, she is able to present this 'most globalized place in the world' (p. 261) in much more detail, drawing on a wide range of sources and broadening the chronological and thematic scope considerably. In place of a summary, Hansen concludes her book with an epilogue consisting mainly of further loosely connected anecdotes, from which she draws rather vague generalizations on alleged parallels between the processes of globalization observed in her book and the challenges of the modern world.

All in all, Hansen's study may be criticized on similar grounds to Preiser-Kapeller's. Due to her immense geographical and thematic scope, it is almost inevitable that she treats most topics in only a cursory manner, even though the number of maps and the decent index are certainly helpful for the reader. Especially when delving into topics outside her main research areas, Hansen refrains from drawing on primary sources and instead chooses to rely almost entirely on secondary literature. While this is completely understandable, it cannot be denied that certain phenomena, especially in the eventful history of the Near East and South Asia, are simply too complex to be dealt with in a few pages and without reference to at least the main scholarly debates. In a number of cases, it is obvious that Hansen drew her information from a handful of studies or sometimes just one work, some of which have been superseded by more recent contributions. In addition, many earlier works on the global Middle Ages remain virtually unmentioned. Finally, the book lacks a comprehensive bibliography, and readers have to rely instead on the information provided in the (deliberately) sparse footnotes, along with a selection of titles for further reading.

Some reviewers have also rightly questioned whether the brief Viking expeditions to the Americas can be considered to have made as much of a contribution to medieval globalization as the highly complex and resilient political, religious, diplomatic, and economic networks of the Eurasian continent, which were by no means confined to the decades around the year 1000, but predated this artificial turning

point by several centuries. Taking this into account, it is questionable whether globalization really began with the second millennium CE.¹¹ However, apart from these concerns, which might be largely confined to academic circles, *The Year 1000 / Das Jahr 1000* must be praised for opening up an immense panorama of fascinating phenomena to interested readers, who will certainly profit from the author's clear and vivid style of writing.

Besides these and other monographs, collaborative projects have also studied the global Middle Ages. Building on the research network 'Defining the Global Middle Ages' (Universities of Oxford, Birmingham, and Newcastle, 2012–15), in 2018 British scholars Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen published a supplement to the journal *Past & Present* entitled *The Global Middle Ages*, in which they gathered contributions by historians and archaeologists specializing in the history of Africa, the Americas, and Eurasia. In contrast to the monographs by Preiser-Kapeller and Hansen, this collection takes a sophisticated approach aimed at academic readers rather than the general public, as the editors' introduction makes clear. Likewise convinced that the origins of globalization preceded the age of European voyages of discovery, the volume's contributors focus on aspects of 'behaviour and interaction on a global scale in the millennium before 1500' (p. 1). However, they explicitly refrain from establishing artificial analogies and links between the medieval period and the globalization processes of other centuries. Instead, the global Middle Ages are presented as a 'a period of dynamic change and experiment when no single part of the world achieved hegemonic status' (p. 2), and its 'distinctive characteristics' (p. 3) are brought to the fore.

Focusing on a broad variety of examples from all over the world, the volume's ten articles address general phenomena which are more or less central to human interactions. The contribution by Mark Whittow presents possible explanations for the ratio of surviving written to non-written sources. Drawing on numerous examples from the Americas, Africa, and East Asia, he stresses that scholars must always bear in mind that their perception of the past is heavily influenced not only

¹¹ Similar criticism has been made in the reviews by Tilman Frasch, *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 51/3–4 (2020), 216–18; Jonathan Good, *Arthuriana*, 30/4 (2020), 70–2; and Thomas Ertl, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 313/2 (2021), 480–1.

by the quantity, but also by the types of available source material. Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power study cosmologies as manifestations of 'global' thinking, focusing mainly on Aztec culture, but taking comparable examples from other parts of the world into account as well. Cosmologies serve as a means for certain peoples or communities to make sense of their existence and its alleged purpose in time and space, and this is as true of the Middle Ages as it is of all periods of human history.

The third essay, by Jonathan Shepard, deals with networks as a basic category through which to perceive multilateral relations. Presenting silk roads overland and via sea as concrete examples of commercial networks, he concludes that these networks were not confined to certain groups, but in fact had an impact on large parts of the societies they connected. A crucial factor in analysing networks is the question of mobility, which is examined by Naomi Standen and Monica White. Focusing mostly on examples from West, Central, and East Asia, they present mobility as a structural phenomenon affecting not only merchants and pilgrims, but also the everyday life of major parts of society. The contribution by Ian Forrest and Anne Haour on the factor of trust addresses another important aspect of human relations, especially between people separated by long distances. By comparing examples from North and West Africa with ones drawn from the Near East and Europe, they present trust as a central aspect of both short- and long-distance relationships.

Simon Yarrow's article then opens up another thematic field by probing two prospects for the global Middle Ages: the loosening of the conceptual boundaries assigned to the Middle Ages by modern historiography, and the reframing of this period as a global phenomenon. In this context, Yarrow understands 'medieval globality' as 'the unfolding of collective imaginaries in tension with diffuse local and entangled modes of evaluative agency' (p. 214). The next contribution, by Conrad Leyser, Naomi Standen, and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, adopts a more practical approach by examining different settlement patterns and their contemporary perception in a comparative perspective spanning Africa, Europe, and East Asia. Next, Hilde De Weerd, Catherine Holmes, and John Watts turn the volume's focus back to concrete human interactions. Focusing on three case studies from Song China, fifteenth-century

France, and Byzantium, they examine practices of political mediation and communication which ‘connected the actions, interests and expectations of individuals and communities in the localities to the creation, maintenance and critique of high public power’ (p. 288).

The last two contributions take up broader approaches again: Glen Dudbridge focuses on the contested paradigm of the world system, which scholars have perceived either as a single system, whether long gone or constantly evolving, or as several successive systems. Dudbridge applies this approach to the period from 600 to 900 CE, presenting the ‘East Asian circuit’ and the ‘Islamic ecumene’ as two examples whose comparison can yield new impulses. Instead of a formal conclusion, the final contribution by Alan Strathern provides a stimulating outlook on future research by linking the concept of the global Middle Ages with the adjacent and already well-established idea of a global early modernity. He emphasizes the main conceptual points of tension and the similarities between these paradigms, concluding that scholars of both periods have to be aware of each other’s findings, not least because they are connected through the much older concept of ‘pre-modernity’ (p. 344).

The Global Middle Ages is a very important contribution to scholarly debate. The greatest advantage of the volume’s methodological approach is that its contributors abstain from identifying a distinct world region or a specific period within the Middle Ages as a prime example of globalization. Rather, the phenomenological orientation of the individual chapters permits a technical but nevertheless broad and colourful view of an interconnected world in the medieval millennium and beyond. All of the contributions, many of them written jointly by various specialists, analyse their respective phenomena against an immense background of examples spanning different continents and periods, making them very valuable studies in their own right, and even more so in the context of the whole volume. Although a number of important regions like India, Japan, and the Pacific islands are rather under-represented, the extensive bibliography and detailed index bear witness to the volume’s broad perspective.¹²

¹² Cf. also the reviews by Robert Ian Moore, *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, 2/1–2 (2020), 35–9; and by Ruth Mostern, *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 3/4 (2019), 640–3.

The last book to be reviewed is another edited volume, but one that takes a very different approach to *The Global Middle Ages*. In *Italien als Vorbild?*, which is based on an eponymous conference held in 2018, Jörg Oberste and Susanne Ehrich bring together ten contributions by international scholars, all focusing on economic and cultural interdependencies between European metropolises during the period between 1300 and 1600, which the editors consider to be ‘the eve of the first globalization’ (p. 10). The famous expeditions of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan, labelled here the ‘founding dates of a European-dominated global economy’ (p. 10), had been based on the immense economic power, geographical knowledge, and nautical expertise of Italian cities and trading companies. Furthermore, Italy had been an influential ‘cultural model’ (p. 11) for medieval and early modern Europe. Providing a comparative context for this Italian role model, some of the volume’s contributions focus on other political and economic capitals of Europe, which were connected to Italy through both competition and lively exchange on many levels.

After the editors’ introduction, which underlines the key points of the volume’s conceptual approach and highlights the main concerns of each chapter, the reader is presented with the first case study. Harriet Rudolph examines diplomatic practice in Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Focusing not only on the relevant institutions, but also on knowledge management and ‘guiding principles’ (p. 25) as important factors in diplomatic relations, she concludes with a significant reassessment of the ‘myth’ of Venetian diplomacy (p. 21). Another view on La Serenissima is provided by Nicolai Kölmel, who deals with the perception of the city as a metropolis between around 1480 and 1560. Taking into account both written sources and paintings, he traces how this view changed over time. He also includes Amsterdam as a comparative example, for which Italian cities can be considered role models only to a certain extent. Rembert Eufe then offers a third perspective on Venetian history by examining the multi-lingual administration in Crete during the five centuries of Venetian rule. Having initially been imported from the Republic, administrative practices on the island always remained open to new impulses from the Italian mainland, but also adapted to specific local requirements.

Christoph Dartmann takes us to another important maritime republic. Taking Venice as a 'paradigmatic example' (p. 89), he focuses on late medieval Genoa as a 'Mediterranean port metropolis' (p. 91) as well as a 'northern Italian regional power' (p. 96). He concludes by addressing the main reasons for Genoa's decline in importance at the end of the Middle Ages. The following contribution by Albert Göschl takes a different approach by comparing literary works by the Florentines Filarete (c.1400–69) and Anton Francesco Doni (1513–74). These authors wrote about imagined 'ideal metropolises', to which they assigned both general and specific characteristics. Martin Raspe then presents a contribution that is only very loosely connected to the issue of globalization: he discusses the question of whether Farfa Abbey near Rome was the first medieval *Klosterhof* (a farm operated by a monastery) and thus a possible role model for later foundations.

In the next chapter, the reader's attention is once again turned towards Florence—or more specifically, the commune's merchant elite. Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli traces the diverse activities and social cohesion of this group in the great late medieval trade centres of Bruges, London, Seville, and Lisbon. Although the Florentines seem to have lacked a significant 'corporate spirit' (p. 142), their successful collaboration in financing large-scale projects can be demonstrated in various examples.

The following two essays provide the counter-examples to the Italian cities that I mentioned above. Ulf Christian Ewert focuses on the paradigm of path dependency, denoting the inability of economic systems to change their basic organizational or institutional elements. He studies this concept via the example of trading practices in the North and Baltic Sea area (the *Hanseraum*) and, in a second step, compares his findings with the quite different situation in the more dynamic Mediterranean region. The second comparative case study by Bart Lambert deals with Bruges, which was a thriving trade centre before losing its hegemony to Antwerp in the course of the sixteenth century. By tracing this development, Lambert discerns a process of 'gradual decline' in the West Flemish city rather than a 'steep fall' (p. 176).

Much like *The Global Middle Ages*, the editors of *Italien als Vorbild* refrain from closing their volume with a formal conclusion. Instead, the

last chapter by Dennis O. Flynn opens up a much wider geographical perspective. He traces the silver trade between Europe and China, which underwent radical changes in the fifteenth century due to the depletion of Chinese silver mines. European markets quickly adapted to the new situation, in part by tapping recently discovered resources in Central and South America, while Venice relied heavily on its trade relations with the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the author denies that the flow of goods along the 'Africa–Europe–Asia corridor' (p. 192) was the starting point for the globalization of economic systems. In his view, the beginning of such processes can only be discerned towards the end of the sixteenth century at the earliest, when the three main parts of the world (the Pacific, the Americas, and Eurasia and Africa) gradually became more and more connected (pp. 192–3).

After working through the contributions of *Italien als Vorbild?*, which are rounded off not by a bibliography, but at least by a decent index (pp. 198–204), the reader might be left in some perplexity. Although each article is valuable on its own, it is difficult to see how they are connected to each other, or to the paradigm of 'globalization'. While the case studies on Venice, Genoa, and Florence give many insights into the far-flung and innovative Italian trade networks across the Mediterranean, the selection of comparative examples outside Italy seems more arbitrary than representative. Case studies from the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, or Eurasia would have contributed substantially to a broader picture. Similarly, some contributions, such as those on Farfa Abbey and the 'ideal metropolises' (which are nevertheless excellent studies in their own right), seem only loosely connected to the volume's central approach. Although many articles touch upon developments beyond the Mediterranean at least in passing, the final chapter by Denis O. Flynn is the only contribution with a truly 'globalized' scope, as promised by the volume's title. Nevertheless, the contributors have succeeded in presenting the Italian metropolises as thriving and innovative powers within the complex trade networks connecting Europe and the Mediterranean at the transition between the medieval and early modern periods.

Comparing all four publications examined in this article is not an easy task. First and foremost, they are all worth reading, not least because each of them opens up a broad panorama featuring a plethora

of developments and processes connecting large parts of the world. Whether these phenomena are studied via relevant secondary literature or, even more laudably, via primary sources, gathering them into a single publication can be considered a remarkable achievement. This holds especially true for the monographs by Johannes Preiser-Kapeller and Valerie Hansen, who processed their immense corpora of material on their own, while the volumes edited by Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen and by Jörg Oberste and Susanne Ehrich bring together the collaborative efforts of experts specializing in different disciplines. What is more, the studies differ in respect to their target audiences. While the two monographs seem to be aimed at a broad audience of scholars and interested lay readers alike, and thus adopt a somewhat less complicated approach in terms of both writing style and the discussion of scholarly debates (see for example Hansen, p. 9), the two edited volumes gather contributions on specialist issues and confine themselves to academic discourse in their respective fields. These structural differences are also reflected in the media response to each publication.

Perhaps the biggest contrasts can be discerned in the approaches and perspectives brought to bear on the global Middle Ages. Preiser-Kapeller locates important impulses for globalization processes within the 'long late antiquity', focusing mainly on Africa and Eurasia and placing European actors merely at the periphery of events. In contrast, Hansen takes a geographically much wider but chronologically narrower point of view by concentrating more or less on the turn of the first millennium. Perhaps the broadest perspective, both geographically and chronologically, is adopted by the different articles in *The Global Middle Ages* edited by Holmes and Standen, whose theoretically grounded approaches make significant contributions to scholarly debate without labelling particular periods or world regions as especially important. In comparison to these three volumes, the conference proceedings published by Oberste and Ehrich lag behind to some extent. In a rather Eurocentric perspective, the contributions gathered in *Italien als Vorbild?* focus on late medieval Italy. Although at least some of the essays endeavour to broaden the geographical scope, one cannot escape the impression that 'globalization' is not the editors' main concern, but that they use it as a buzzword and consider

it to be a phenomenon more or less exclusively associated with the early modern age and later periods.

Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to favour any one publication over the others. Each of the approaches taken in these books has its strengths and weaknesses, as well as a certain degree of justification without any claim to universal validity. However, approaches focusing more or less on a single world region (Oberste and Ehrich) or on artificial turning points (Hansen) have the potential to overestimate or marginalize certain developments and influential factors and thus distort the perspective. In contrast, theory-based approaches that are broad in geographical and chronological scope, such as those applied by Holmes and Standen in *The Global Middle Ages*, may prove more stimulating to scholarly debate and establish connections with different academic disciplines. Still, this debate should not remain confined exclusively to academic circles, but should be open to the general public as well. To this end, more accessible yet sophisticated publications like those by Preiser-Kapeller and Hansen play an important role too. In that sense, all of the publications reviewed here are valuable contributions to the ongoing debate on 'globalization' in the Middle Ages and beyond.

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