
From the beginning of the fourteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth, western Europe experienced massive upheavals, changes, innovations and devastations. *The Body Broken: Medieval Europe 1300–1520* offers a new look at this period in history, centred around the ‘metaphor of metaphors’ (x), the Body of Christ. This engaging textbook clearly and adroitly explains the many facets of medieval life and is a useful handbook for both students and scholars — a primer and a refresher.

In his Preface, Charles Briggs explains the need for such a reexamination of the medieval world, and justifies his choice of theme. By creating a framework using the Body of Christ as it was understood by medieval people in religious, artistic, literary and theological terms, Briggs captures the essence of the age. In the Middle Ages, the body of Christ was a metaphor for the whole of society, the physical body of the people and the spiritual body of the Church; Christ’s body was also very present in the ritual of the Eucharist, which touched people at every level of society. Briggs clarifies the symbolic power of Christ’s body — how it was fashioned and manipulated by the Church to further its claim of universality, and how the liturgical rite of the Eucharist and the feast of Corpus Christi functioned within the community and the world at large. He uses this belief, and this presence as a touchstone for a comprehensive history of medieval Europe.

The Introduction begins with the consecration of the Host — the event that unites all Catholics in devotion and was a defining feature of medieval Christianity. Briggs analyses the contest of religious and temporal powers that presented challenges to the universal authority of
the Church. The introduction describes the doctrine of transubstantiation, the dissent against it, and how medieval people related to Christ’s suffering, specifically in the broken pieces of the Eucharist which symbolized His broken body.

This religious metaphor for the body of Europe at the turn of the fourteenth century, however, is not pervasive in the book. Its text is not merely a history of religious doctrine and popular reception, but a critical analysis of all facets of medieval history that diverges from popular historical works like that of Johan Huizinga (The Waning of the Middle Ages, 1919) and Barbara Tuchman (A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous Fourteenth Century, 1978), and rejects readings of the medieval world as simplistic and barbaric. Briggs argues that the religious iconography, as embedded in the medieval psyche as it was, provides an understanding of medieval notions of identity, and through it he tracks the development of nationalistic sentiment across cultures.

The book is separated into sections that focus on a specific theme, within which are chapters that further break down the discussion. The first section, ‘Social and Economic Change’, begins with events that had a fairly cataclysmic effect on medieval society and produced sophisticated and progressive change. Chapter One focuses on the ‘Demography of Disaster’ — crises resulting from population pressure, climate, subsistence shortages, plague, war, popular rebellion and disease. The population of medieval Europe was cut nearly in half during the course of the fourteenth century, a massive demographic decline that lasted for the rest of the Middle Ages. Briggs challenges the notion that this decimation was caused by one factor alone, and systematically outlines all of the possible contributing factors supported with maps, diagrams and tables. In each chapter he weaves literary examples, like Boccaccio’s Decameron, into his historical analysis, providing a nuanced reading of history in context.
Chapter Two investigates the intricate relationships of individuals, families and communities and the structure of society that was modelled after the image of the Body of Christ and its relationship to the Church. This chapter considers medieval attitudes towards the place of the individual within society and community — as part of a communal ‘body’. Marriage, family and household were social components of individual identity, but marriages and other social contracts were complex and the realities of such arrangements reflected many layers of alliance, position, class and gender. There are sections on the nobility, rural and urban communities, and how each fits into the body politic and saw itself in relation to the others. Every aspect of medieval life is included: beggars, prostitutes, peasants, merchants, burghers, knights, nobles, kings and queens.

From people, the text moves to trade, technology, commercialism and exploration — endeavours that advanced medieval society, but also responded to various economic crises. Briggs asks whether there really was an economic crisis in the later Middle Ages which amounted to ‘a gloomy time in the history of the European economy’ (65). He examines the various modern arguments against the medieval realities, dissecting the factors that contribute to economic recession and the various forces at play. Population decline and demographic stagnation contributed to economic contraction, both of which were precipitated by disease — the Plague. Trade was dominated by the needs of the lay and clerical elite, as were many of the exploration projects, and Briggs provides detailed information about every product used and produced in medieval Europe: beer, wool, silk, textiles, wood, precious metals, etc. His conclusion is that the economy expanded and then contracted, rather than actually declining, and he rejects the idea of a ‘waning’ Middle Ages like that put forward by Huizinga.
Section two turns the focus from the economy and the community to the political developments that shaped this particular period. In it, Briggs explains how social and economic factors affected or were affected by political change. Chapter Four outlines the theory and ideology of government and how this development was spurred on by the translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and its incorporation into the university curriculum. The rise of the medieval universities in Bologna and Paris changed the political face of Europe. This chapter deals specifically with medieval intellectualism, the language of political theory, the development of customary and canon law, mirrors for princes, rituals of rule and religion — all features of the modern state that appeared as early as the thirteenth century. The power of princes and the primacy of the papacy were contested issues throughout this period as the state vied for supremacy.

But there were limits to this power, and Chapter Five carefully examines the fickleness of Fortune in maintaining it and how popular response to aggressive displays of royal power led to the development of national identity and the genesis of the modern state. This chapter outlines the all structures of medieval rule — monarchies and city-states, courts and councils, the specific development of legal systems touched on in the previous chapter, and the rise and fall of various princes. Each region of Europe is treated in turn: The British Isles (*sic*), France and Burgundy, the Iberian kingdoms, Italy and the Holy Roman Empire, with accompanying tables of rulers and a concise history of each kingdom’s internal strife.

This strife often manifested as civil or regional war, which is the focus of Chapter Six. Part of the ethos of war is the ideal of chivalry, which played a part in furthering the crusades throughout this period. The military aspects of medieval warfare are presented in detailed terms including cost, weapons, innovations like the longbow and artillery, and
then contrasted with the literary perpetuation of chivalric ideals. Here reality meets the unrealistic (but popular) expectations of chivalry. This notion of honour and an ethical code of conduct played a large role in crusading ideology, despite the many cruelties and disasters of those military endeavours perpetuated in the name of religion.

Religion becomes the central focus again in the next section dedicated entirely to the heart of the book’s theme, the Body of Christ, of which there are traces earlier in the text but which crystallize in this explanation of medieval belief and devotion. The question of papal power, supremacy and jurisdiction is a central part of this discussion in Chapter Seven, which also involves the relocation of the papacy to Avignon, the Great Schism and its effect on the reformation tendencies of John Wycliffe and Martin Luther. Chapter Eight gives an overview of different threads of Christian belief, competing theological discourses, heresy, orthodoxy and dissent, beginning with the trial of Joan of Arc as an example of the fluidity of medieval devotion. This chapter is an examination of lay religion, sacred time and space delineated by the liturgical and agricultural calendars, pilgrimages, relics, thoughts on death dying and the afterlife, relations between laity and the clergy, and all the factors that finally lead to the Reformation.

The book demonstrates that the medieval period was constantly in flux, constantly evolving and developing. It was not stagnant or darkened by ignorance, as part five explains. Devoted to the forces of cultural change, this section has chapters on the importance of knowledge and learning to medieval society, embodied by the rise of humanism, schools and universities. It dispels many modern mythologies about the Middle Ages as ignorant or uneducated. Chapter Nine presents an image of a ‘broadly literate and learned society’ (233) and the institutions of learning that gave rise to it — the educational programmes that operated outside of schools, the opportunities for education, the intellectual debates and
innovations, including humanism, that furthered social development. That thread is picked up in Chapter Ten which analyses the evolution of the vernacular and the revival of ancient languages and literatures. The chapter summarizes the careers and major works of some of the strongest medieval literary lights: Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve, Dante and Petrarch, and illuminates the process of literary transmission from manuscript to printed book. Music, art and architecture also played a significant role in the intellectual lives of medieval people, evidenced by the patronage of great cathedrals, libraries and works of art. Photos of paintings, manuscripts and cathedrals punctuate the examples and give a visual reference for all of the ideas presented in earlier sections.

The Body Broken concludes by returning to the metaphor of Christ’s Body, neatly tying everything together and arguing that the medieval period really was not a ‘middle’ age but was part of a continuum of human existence and development, in some ways very distant from the modern era, and in others very much alike. Though the conclusion ends rather abruptly, Briggs finishes his discourse by outlining the other ‘myths of identity and unity’ that ‘soon filled the void left behind when the Body of Christ shuffled off the scene’ (284).

As a whole, this text is a solid introduction to the medieval period. Briggs integrates the most recent scholarship into his historical discussion and provides a wealth of primary source references, supported by a comprehensive list of suggested further reading and a full bibliography. If nothing else, it highlights the depth and intricacy of medieval society and its many facets. Its clear, concise format with supplemental materials makes The Body Broken a useful addition to any scholar’s library, or course curriculum.

Larissa Tracy  
Department of English and Modern Languages  
Longwood University  
tracylc@longwood.edu