

Framing the Early Middle Ages

Chris Wickham

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Chris Wickham : Framing the Early Middle Ages before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Framing the Early Middle Ages:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Take with water - it's very dry.By Mark MoscaAbstruse, dry-as-dust, more than what want and less. Not for the general reader, even with some knowledge and interest in the subject Lots of information of interest only of the true student/scholar.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Clear, methodical and comprehensive depiction of the societies emerging ...By MarcosClear, methodical and comprehensive depiction of the societies emerging from the crisis of the Roman Empire in the fifth century.58 of 59 people found the following review helpful. Sure to set the standard on the SubjectBy John E. MackThis is a monumental review of the economic and social histories of the former provinces of the Roman Empire between the penetration of the empire by the barbarians and the imperial coronation of Charlemagne. Along with the Origins of the European Economy, this book is likely to be the standard social and economic survey of the dark ages for years to come. The author surveys each of the major territorial regions of the fomer Roman Empire region-by-region, and slowly develops his theses. These include: (1) a "soft-fall" view of the disintegration of the Western Empire, concluding that many of its structures were in place well into the seventh century and gradually were melded into the less sophisticated successor states of Western Europe; (2) a taxation-driven notion of the state, concluding that the major factor distinguishing Rome and Roman power from that of successor states is that Rome had an elaborate and relatively efficient tax system, and that the successor states did not; (3) a regionalist approach to conclusions, finding that things changed in different degrees in different ways throughout the territories of the Roman Empire -- slowly and relatively little in the East, massively in Britain, in odd ways in Spain and Gaul; (4) a picture of transformation from peasant-based society to feudal society,

occurring rather later than many historians would allow; (5) a strong de-emphasis on barbarian wars and conquests as an explanation for these transformations; and (5) a peasant's eye view of the transformation from Roman Empire to the Middle Ages. It is in the latter that the only real problem with the book arises. The author is so pro-peasant in his view that he takes what could be called a "Xena" view of medieval class struggles. In Xena (and Conan, and Red Sonya, and 10,000 B.C., to name but a few sword-and-sorcery potboilers) there is a familiar scene where the peaceful peasants are going about their village business, talking to each other and carrying out their daily tasks, while a band of heavily-armed thugs is approaching the village on horseback, ready to destroy it with fire and sword. In this author's world, heavily-financed aristocrats are about to encroach on an idyllic and egalitarian peasant world, forcing the formerly free peasantry to pay rent, work harder, and have more children. In what is perhaps his most radical claim, the author suggests that the serious decline in population from the late empire to about 700 A.D. was due, not to war, pestilence, famine and occupation but -- family planning! He admits that he cannot prove this, but it is clearly an idea which attracts him. I am dubious -- it is difficult to think of any other society between the birth of agriculture and the industrial revolution where the bulk of the population did not breed to its Malthusian limit, and the claim that early medieval Europe was an exception would require a good deal of proof. That said, this is a wonderful book. Even its bias supplies a point of view which has been the subject of all-too-little factual analysis in the past. And by focusing on social relations above all, the author presents a very different view of the dark ages than that usually presented in our histories. Far from being a time of barbarism and decay, the early Middle Ages (the author balks at the term "dark ages") were a period of relative prosperity, equality, and good relations compared to what was to come.