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1. The head and shoulders of a cadaver, sold on the antiquities market in 2003.

MEDIEVAL BODIES

In 2003 a preserved human head was sold by a dealer in Paris to a Canadian private collection for an undisclosed amount. In itself this was not an unusual event. Human remains, like any other type of valuable historical artefact, pass back and forth all the time in the busy international markets for medical oddities and prized antiquities. But this object, this body, aroused particular curiosity.

It strikes a vivid first impression. Frozen in a dramatic rigor mortis, its head is thrown backwards from the stubs of two shoulders, throat exposed and mouth agape. A large split makes its way down the face from the centre of its forehead, and we see, when it is flipped around, that the entirety of its cranium has been excavated in a hoop about the head. The top of the skull is missing, popped off like the lid of a biscuit tin, and the brain has been removed, leaving only its shrivelled base and a flat stump of spinal cord.

To understand more about this enigmatic cadaver a team of French paleopathologists were given permission to examine the remains in more detail. Subjecting them to a number of innovative medico-archaeological techniques, all sorts of information about the deceased quickly began to surface. They discovered that the figure was

male, originally of Caucasian descent and probably around forty-five years old at the time of death. Short red hairs on the chin and upper lip suggested he had once been of an auburn complexion. And several scans confirmed that his head and shoulders had been preserved using a type of quick-setting, mercury-based metallic wax, injected into the major arteries soon after death to stiffen his pose like a sculptural mould. Most intriguingly, radiocarbon dating estimated that the figure had lived at some point between the years 1200 and 1280: the body was medieval.

For historians like me, such discoveries offer an immediate and enticing gateway onto the past, and not just through the scientific detail of long-dead bones. We know this half-man's gender, his age, even his hair colour, but his remains still animatedly pose all sorts of other pressing questions. Who was he? Where was he from? What was his story? He is a prompt from the past to dig deeper into what we know of the moment in which he lived. And exploring medieval bodies is particularly vital today, because their era continues to be much misunderstood. The centuries sandwiched between the accolades of ancient Greece or Rome and the classical world reborn in the European renaissance are seen as a static and sequestering time, an idea we read in their different names: the 'Dark' Ages or the 'medieval', from the Latin *medium aevum*, a 'Middle Age'. It is a moment often defined by events outside itself, by what it is not, and when we look at medieval artefacts – be they bodies or poems, paintings or chronicles – we have a tendency to emphasise the negative. We draw them into a sceptical and often quite gruesome narrative of the period that has been handed down to us, just the kind of unpleasant moment in history where people might well have ended up with their head split open and injected with metallic wax.

The pervasiveness of this feeling was recently made crystal clear in a visitor survey undertaken by a major London museum during plans to renovate its medieval and renaissance gallery spaces. An average slice of the visiting public was asked by researchers to project themselves into each of the two eras in turn, first the renaissance and then the medieval, and say what they thought they might see or how they believed they might feel about the world around them. Responses

to the renaissance, recorded verbatim by the museum, were bounteous. People seemed genuinely contented, filled with a happy wonder:

> I'm in Florence walking by the river at midday. It's peaceful, I'm smiling. I'm an artist's model and he's sculpting the Madonna and Child.
>
> The sunshine sparkles, there's a little glade and a little lake. There's philosophy, people sitting round talking about politics, books. Music … I want to stay and dream.

Sounds lovely. But for the same people, envisaging the medieval world meant that things quickly turned sour:

> There are soldiers, peasants, high castles, muddy lowlands … Black Death and Plague are all around. It's raining. People are drunk on mead and fighting among themselves. The artists are not respected.
>
> I'm in a dungeon wearing a potato sack and it's night. It's cold, there are rats. The windows have bars at floor level. I stole some potatoes for your newborn child.

It is a stereotype heard often: that from roughly the years 300 to 1500 most people inhabited a time oscillating between *Braveheart* and *Blackadder*, a world of generalised misery and ignorance, living in piteous squalor only to make war in the fretful darkness. A useless millennium or so. For at least one of the visitors surveyed by the museum this popular view has even gone so far as to warp their historical placement of people and things. The potatoes they envisage stealing – presumably not fluffy, plump roasties, but hard and cold and raw – would in fact only have reached Europe from the Americas in the 1570s, well after the darkness of this supposedly 'Dark' Age is meant to have lifted.

Who or what is to blame for this picture is not entirely clear. In some ways, doing down the past seems a natural reflection of how we wish to see life in the present. To appear enlightened and modern

we need a dark and ignorant past to set ourselves starkly against. Pop culture has definitely taken this up with force in the romanticised figure of a Disney princess, cruelly trapped in her *ye olde* castle, or the bleak violence of nipple-strewn TV dramas like *Game of Thrones*. It is no coincidence that in Quentin Tarantino's 1994 cult hit *Pulp Fiction*, when Ving Rhames's character Marsellus is poised to take gory revenge on a man who has held him hostage, he bitingly tells his hapless prey, 'I'm gonna get *medieval* on your ass.' The era is evoked at once as a historical fantasy and a vicious threat.

Looking back through history, this sense of a nasty medievalism is encountered pretty regularly. In the nineteenth century the idea of a gruesome Middle Ages was a particularly potent fascination for the Victorians, who happily distorted the past to suit their flamboyant taste for the neo-Gothic and the macabre. The idea goes back further still, present in the writing of thinkers during the Enlightenment. In the 1580s trashing the medieval was so widely accepted that the English antiquarian William Camden felt he could skip disparagingly over the entire period when writing his comprehensive, grand history of Britain, offering little more than a paragraph or two: 'I will', he says, 'only give you a taste of the Middle Age, which was so o'ercast with dark clouds, or rather thick fogs of ignorance.' Rather touchingly, medieval thinkers themselves seem to have been the first to conceptualise their age as having a certain middle-ness to it, stuck between two brighter, more exciting points of history. The Italian author Francesco Petrarca wrote with a mixture of longing and optimistic excitement about a shift of cultural values that he was observing around him in Italy during the fourteenth century and which he hoped might drag the medieval world forward in its wake:

> There was a more fortunate age and probably there will be one again; in the middle, in our time, you see the confluence of wretches and ignominy … My fate is to live among varied and confusing storms. But for you perhaps, if, as I hope and wish, you will live long after me, there will follow a better age. When the darkness has been dispersed, our descendants can come again into the former pure radiance.

Whenever it originated, this view of the medieval period is unquestionably distorted. Revealing the realities of the Middle Ages from this warped impression has been part of my work for more than a decade and is at the very heart of this book. We cannot patronise this seemingly distant moment in time simply to make ourselves feel better. Rather, in order to truly grasp any aspect of the medieval world we need to engage with it on its own terms. We need to try, as best we can all this while later, to see life as it was understood by our French half-man before his body was frozen in time, indeed by a whole cast of different characters who one by one will fall into focus: a physician treating a patient in sixth-century Ravenna, a Persian poet writing a piece of epic verse in twelfth-century Azerbaijan, a seamstress sewing a garment in the East End of fifteenth-century London, and many more. We need to look beyond caricature to the nitty-gritty detail of life. Or, in the case of this book, the detail of life and death and art. And when we do, we will always discover there is another story to be had beyond that of a backwards, muddy Middle Ages.

Beginnings?

What, then, was medieval life really like? How we start to answer this question depends on where and when in the great span of the Middle Ages we want to look, for the term captures in two short words an enormous period, a whole multiplicity of peoples, cultures, religions and geographies.

A moment so glittering and diverse understandably comes with blurred beginnings and contested endings. We could officially set the medieval clock ticking after the collapse of the Roman Empire, which had dominated and unified enormous swathes of Europe, Africa and Asia for the preceding centuries, kick-starting the Middle Ages in the year 476, when the last of the western Roman emperors, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the Germanic king Odoacer, bringing imperial rule to an end in Europe. But in reality this empire had already been in serious decline for some time. We could just as easily

begin talking of the medieval in the early 400s, when northern European tribes started regularly crossing the Rhine to invade Italy, or even a whole two centuries earlier, when the over-expanded Roman world first began to experience political instability and economic slowdown. Yet these early medieval moments can be particularly difficult to pin down for lack of hard evidence: few complete buildings or objects survive, even fewer written sources, and the archaeological record can be sparse. Much of this book, then, by necessity aims at the better-documented, later parts of the medieval narrative, but at this end of the period too, sources are far from bounteous, and a formal full stop for the Middle Ages is equally difficult to find. A move into something resembling the renaissance did not happen overnight. The kind of changing ideas, actions or artworks that signalled to some that a paradigm shift was under way in fourteenth-century Italy might have only come into fashion a full century later in London or Seville, Tunis or Jerusalem. Some two hundred years separate the earliest self-aware critics of the medieval world – people like Petrarca – from the work of sixteenth-century renaissance big-hitters like Michelangelo, Cervantes or Luther, all of whom still lived in a world tangibly buzzing with the influence of the medieval. Historical change is, after all, a human thing. It does not sweep uniformly across regions in an instant.

Nonetheless, a shared classical heritage undeniably binds together the medieval history of the regions on all sides of the Mediterranean, separating them somewhat from the busy parallel stories of the Far East, India, China, sub-Saharan Africa or the pre-Columbian Americas. Three principal inheritors of the legacy of Rome come to the fore, each representing a slightly different texture of the medieval bodies that I want to try to trace.

The first is Byzantium, a Greek-speaking, Christian empire which at its height extended throughout Greece and the Balkans, Anatolia, north Africa and much of the Levant. The Byzantines saw themselves less as inheritors of the classical Greco-Roman world than as a direct continuation of it. Their seat of government was Constantinople, a thronging metropolis of architectural sophistication and political

grandeur which had been founded as the easternmost of the Roman Empire's two capitals in the year 330, when Emperor Constantine rededicated a city formerly known as Byzantion in his own name. Byzantine emperors continued for centuries to rule in a direct lineage from Constantine's unshakable Roman roots, and although its territories and influence would slowly shrink, the city itself only finally fell to the Ottoman Turks at the very end of the Middle Ages in 1453, after nearly a millennium of Byzantine control.

Second were those medieval peoples living in western and central Europe, from Scandinavia in the north to Italy in the south, some of whom had actually toppled Rome itself. Unlike the united empire of Byzantium to its east, in the earlier Middle Ages this region was far more fractured and from the fifth century constantly reconstituted its borders. Power shifted between a range of clashing cultural groups – the Franks, Angles, Saxons, Celts, Vikings, Visigoths, Slavs, Magyars, Lombards, Bulgars, Avars – whose kingdoms relied on battlefield successes for both political legitimacy and for military plunder to finance the state. It is perhaps for this reason that their names have since been transformed into some of our more derogatory modern terms: think, for instance, of the Barbarians or the Vandals, both words used in the Middle Ages to refer to actual historical groups. But, their political violence aside, these states were far from filled with the impoverished potato-snatchers conjured up in the London museum survey. Bolstered by an alliance with the Roman Church, from around 800 onwards these polities began to stabilise, making a more conscious effort to encourage learning and culture in the mould of the Roman Empire they had conquered. By the later Middle Ages many had fully concretised into the complex nation-states that would form the backbone of early modern Europe and from there go on to colonise huge swathes of the globe.

The third and perhaps most unexpected of these Roman heirs was the Islamic world. Emerging from the sparsely populated Arabian Desert in the 630s, Muslim peoples clearly had no immediate geographical proximity to the lands of Constantine, Julius Caesar or Plato. But as a combined religious and political force they were to expand

with serious speed, their armies moving so quickly into territories once held by the Byzantine and Persian empires that only a century or so later the caliphate – derived from the term *khalifah* (خليفة), or 'successor', given to Islam's leaders after the Prophet Muhammad – encompassed the Iberian Peninsula, north Africa and most of the Middle East, stretching all the way to modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like western Europe, the caliphate was far from a unified state. Internal rifts soon turned into full-on civil war and the foundation of several competing medieval Muslim kingdoms. But, unlike its Christian neighbours, Islam was united by a common language, Arabic, and a flourishing literary movement centred around Baghdad saw the mass translation of multiple ancient writings into the Muslim *lingua franca*, preserved by copyists working from languages as diverse as Greek, Syriac, Persian, Sanskrit and Pahlavi. This Islamic world was to fall into a near-constant tension with the rest of Europe, especially after the launch of the First Crusade to reclaim the holy sites of Jerusalem in 1095. Yet, particularly in their early moments of expansion, these Muslim kingdoms thrived through a tolerance of different religions and peoples, and remained a consistent partner of many in the West for trade, commerce and cultural exchange throughout the entirety of the period. Whenever we might think the Middle Ages began or ended, it is the positive interaction between the political spheres of Byzantium, Europe and Islam, not only their opposition, that provides the key to understanding the era as a coherent moment, multiple complex cultures indelibly bound together through a shared Mediterranean past.

You, a Thousand Years Ago

For all the logic of its unifying Roman foundations, if you or I were to be transported back a thousand or so years from the present into the medieval past, we would find ourselves in an uncanny place at once startlingly different from and yet strangely familiar to our own.

Most striking might be its apparent emptiness. Demographically speaking, medieval populations were significantly smaller: there are roughly as many people in the United Kingdom today as there probably were across the entirety of Europe in the Middle Ages. Many of them lived in small towns and villages, the cumulative engines of a largely agricultural economy, and in the absence of jet planes and motorways life might feel surprisingly quiet. At the same time we might visit larger civic centres such as medieval Cairo, Paris, Granada or Venice, whose crowded streets, busy markets and generally condensed living would feel just as bustling as many modern cities. The biggest of these would reach populations of half a million or more and harboured elaborate centres of political power, diverse industries and, later, a university-trained intellectual elite.

Religion would be something we recognise too from modernity, yet it played a much greater role in the fundamentals of medieval life in a way now largely lost. This is not to say, as the caricature sometimes suggests, that Christianity, Islam or Judaism was all anyone ever talked about. A good parallel would be the way we think and speak about science today. We do not go around slapping each other on the back and congratulating ourselves on the existence of gravity, constantly expressing gratitude and awe that Newtonian physics stops us from floating off the earth's surface into space. Rather, it is a baseline for how we see and understand this world, its past, present and future. Religious tenets like the biblical story of Creation or the potential daily intervention of the Almighty were an accepted but not necessarily all-consuming part of a medieval worldview.

Of course, while I am arguing that we have misjudged the Middle Ages, there is no getting away from the fact that it was in many ways extremely tough. By the standards of the present day, almost everyone in the pre-modern world right up to the 1800s would be classed as living in extreme poverty. Yet medieval people were also aware that, when it came to the shape and fabric of individual living, we are all hostages to fate: our fortunes can rise as well as fall. An illustration from a tenth-century Spanish manuscript shows the image of Fortuna, the Roman goddess of fortune who was also particularly

2. The goddess Fortuna spinning her wheel to change the fate of four kings and their rule. The image was added in the eleventh century to a Visigothic manuscript written in Cardeña in 914 by a scribe named Gomez.

popular with medieval moralists. Crowned and throned, the stunning Queen of Fate spins her wheel to twist a set of figures to and fro. In this grand image those shown at fortune's behest are four kings. Some are in the ascendancy, while others are having their world flipped completely upside down. Tossed through time, the destiny of each is labelled in Latin beside them: *regnabo* ('I shall reign'), *regno* ('I reign'), *regnavi* ('I have reigned'), *sum sine regno* ('I am without

reign'). But one more crank of the handle and everything will change again. Far from being an exclusively royal hazard, the vagaries of chance were a reality of daily life for all. In the words of the English poet John Lydgate (c.1370–1450):

The enuyous ordre of fortunat meuyge
In worldly thynge false and flykerynge
Ne wyll nat suffre vs in this present lyfe
To lyven in reste without werre or stryfe
For she is blynde fykell and vnstable
And of hir course false and full mutable

The envious order of Fortune's moving,
In worldly things false and vacillating.
None will not suffer it in this present life,
To live in rest without war and strife.
For she is blind, fickle, unstable,
And her course is false and mutable.

Clearly the Middle Ages saw itself as having both winners and losers. Most medieval cultures were indeed heavily stratified in this manner, with divisions between the haves and the have-nots reinforced by patterns of wealth and work. Those who owned land, at home or abroad, had both financial control of its produce – wool, wheat, wood, slaves, iron, furs, ships – and, by extension, political control of the people who wished to live or labour on it. This is not to say that medieval living was entirely constituted of emperors and peasants, two camps polarised at totally different extremities of income: in between was a broad spectrum encompassing all sorts of groups, from busy professionals through to skilled craftsmen and an aspirational merchant class. Yet a king could still expect his comfortable surroundings and ample diet to see him greatly exceed the average life expectancy of a labourer harvesting his royal lands, who might have struggled to make it to forty. The daughter of a wealthy lord might receive a thorough schooling at home, while her working-class counterpart would be

unlikely ever to be able to read or write. The son of an aristocratic landowner could be welcomed through familial connections into the political ruling class or well-funded religious institutions, while the son of a farmer was expected to toil in the fields for his entire working life. Like today, for those who found themselves at opposite ends of Fortuna's Wheel, standards of living could be strikingly different.

Giggles and Disgust

The bodies of these medieval men and women would, of course, have been equally varied, but none would have been that dramatically unlike our own. Contrary to the stereotype, people in the Middle Ages were not necessarily much smaller than us. One recent archaeological study of a group of bodies buried over the course of 900 years in a small rural parish in Lincolnshire reveals almost no difference in people's height between the Middle Ages and the Victorian era, averaging around 5 feet 7 inches for a man and 5 feet 3 inches for a woman. Nor were these people all toothless, crippled or constantly sick. True, they lacked a detailed modern understanding of infection which could have helped fight against large-scale disease events like the Black Death, a quick-spreading bacterial epidemic thought to have decimated nearly a quarter of the global population in the 1340s. Yet the air they breathed and the food they ate would have been free of modern chemicals and pollutants, and potentially far healthier than our own.

What was dramatically different, however, was the way medieval people thought their bodies worked. On the whole, the biological and medical notions of the Middle Ages tend to elicit two types of response. First, giggles. Surviving medieval sources advocate subjecting the body to all sorts of strange happenings in order to cure it, many of which can seem weirdly comical in their wrong-headedness: the application of fresh cow dung to help problematic tear ducts, a combination of vinegar and honey rubbed onto the head to fight baldness, the insertion

of peppercorns into the vagina after intercourse as a contraceptive. But this amusing silliness can quickly shift to a rawer sense of discomfort or even disgust at methods of the past. In the Middle Ages a headache might be treated by puncturing the neck and draining the body of several pints of blood, a concoction of boar's bile and potentially deadly hemlock could serve as an anaesthetic, and a range of ailments were thought to be alleviated by burning multiple points on the body's surface with red-hot metal rods. From a modern vantage point these 'cures' seem worse than useless, even torturous.

This is the true difficulty of getting to grips with medieval bodies: their owners conceived of them through theories that have since been totally disproven to the point of absurdity but which nevertheless could not have seemed more vivid or logical in the Middle Ages. We think of our bodies now as a relatively closed and contented circuit, our skin a clear border between the inside and outside of ourselves. But the human form in the medieval period was considered a far more open and porous group of organs and systems. As a result, an understanding of the world circling around the body was crucial to an understanding of what lay within. Natural philosophers and theorists of the preceding Greek and Roman eras had passed on to medieval thinkers the notion that nature was composed of four primary base elements – fire, water, air and earth – and that the disposition of this quartet could affect the external appearance and internal properties of all things. Each element was also aligned with two further fundamentals, moisture and heat: fire was hot and dry, water wet and cold, while earth was dry and cold, and air hot and wet. Substances associated with each element also contained these inherent properties, and in a direct reflection of these natural surroundings medieval bodies were thought to contain four corresponding viscous internal agents known as the humours: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. A person's constitution was determined by the equilibrium of these vitalising substances inside themselves, each in turn linked back to a particular element.

This biological system is perhaps not as abstract as it first seems. Some sense of it can still be felt in our own conceptions of health:

3. A diagram from a book written in the first decade of the twelfth century, known as the Thorney Computus. It shows the macroscopic medieval conception of the world as fundamentally intertwined, outlining the correspondences of the four elements (*Terra*, *Aqua*, *Aer*, *Ignis*) with the months, the zodiac, the winds, the lunar cycles and the ages of man. The first letters of the Latin names for the four cardinal directions are made to spell out the name 'ADAM': mankind thus inhabits the centre of this swirling image.