

Introduction

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Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages

Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen

In modern popular culture the term ‘global’ is synonymous with global connectedness, even ‘globalisation’.³ The Netflix series *Sense8* offers an example of this understanding. The story is a fantasy of total global connectivity in the present day, and follows eight people who are scattered around the world, but linked telepathically. The first series was filmed entirely on location in Berlin, Chicago, London, Mexico City, Mumbai, Nairobi, Reykjavik, San Francisco and Seoul. The opening credits contained 108 shots showing the extraordinary cultural diversity of the world in which we live now.⁴ But as varied, interesting and downright awesome as that sequence is, diversity and connectivity are not modern phenomena alone; nor are many other characteristics widely associated with the ‘global’, including empires, long-distance commercial activity, diasporas, migrations and religious missions. The wider temporal relevance of such ‘global’ topics makes it strange that the study of global history has rarely included the millennium before 1500 C.E. despite a wealth of available evidence. There are several reasons for this marginalisation. One is the still ubiquitous idea that truly global history only began with European long-distance maritime expeditions in the early modern centuries. Another is the usually unstated but persistently powerful assumption about the essential backwardness of the Middle Ages. Also inhibiting are approaches which regard the medieval world as intrinsically alternative to the modern, or post-colonialist anxieties about linking such an apparently Eurocentric term as ‘Middle Ages’ to anything called ‘global’.⁵

³ True of much scholarship as well; see below n. 000.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cmg2hBXj_eI, viewed 27 September 2017.

⁵ Contested interpretations of the European Middle Ages as either the seedbed of Western modernity or as modernity’s essential ‘other’ have a long history, particularly among medievalists in North America: Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel, ‘Medievalisms Old and New. The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies’, *AMH*, ciii (1998), 677-704. See below 000 for more on post-colonialist anxieties.

Our response is to eschew doubt and get on with the task of examining the Global Middle Ages. We argue that however great the methodological, terminological and political difficulties associated with an approach termed the ‘Global Middle Ages’, the plentiful evidence for behaviour and interaction on a global scale in the millennium before 1500 deserves sustained and precise analysis. In a series of thematic chapters we demonstrate that people living in these centuries had global histories.⁶ We do not propose a single grand narrative which, given the infancy of the field of medieval global history, we believe would be premature. Nor do we provide an exhaustive analysis of all aspects of all world regions over a thousand-year period. Instead we argue for a Global Middle Ages that were neither static nor isolated. They were a period of dynamic change and experiment when no single part of the world achieved hegemonic status. In our approach we pick up on important current impulses within the study of global history, above all connectivity and comparison. But ours is not a study seeking parallels or origins. We have not worked by looking for direct analogies between the Middle Ages and the global history of other periods, which is why you will not find a focus here on familiar global topics like ‘empire’, ‘trade’, ‘missionaries’ or civilisational blocs such as the Islamic world, Latin Christendom or the Buddhist ecumene. Nor are we interested in back-projecting into the medieval centuries a modernisation or globalisation narrative. Instead we put the social interactions, expectations and demands of people who lived in these times into global focus through the juxtaposition of specific cases. This means that we explore a range of global phenomena, including cosmologies, networks,

⁶ The chapters are supported by maps, collected at the front of the volume for easy reference. These are primarily for locational purposes but also reflect some of the ways in which network members began to think about the geography of the Global Middle Ages. See General note on maps, 000.

mobility, value, trust, political mediation and resources, many of which have not been recognised as such because they do not map easily onto the categories of enquiry that global historians have used most frequently. While some categories familiar in global studies such as movement and connections are central to our analysis, we offer a challenge to the dominant economic and geopolitical paradigm of global history, with its teleological view of the relentless development of a global order defined by the ever increasing circulation of people, goods, and capital; that is, by ‘globalisation’.

The arguments presented here were first developed by the members of an AHRC-funded network project called ‘Defining the Global Middle Ages’, organised by the Universities of Oxford, Birmingham and Newcastle, which ran between 2012 and 2015.⁷ In the first half of this introduction, we address theoretical issues raised by the concept of the ‘Global Middle Ages’ and discuss our methodologies. We outline the ways in which scholars with expertise in different world regions, specifically including those outside Eurasia, can start from their different regional evidence bases and interpretative traditions and work productively together at a global level. Indeed, rather than seeing those disparities in evidence and interpretation as barriers, we present a bottom-up methodology that does not simply accommodate but takes advantage of difference. We present in most of these papers a method we have called ‘combinative’ (discussed further below), which combines rather than formally compares case studies, and which sets the local and the global in dynamic conversation. But the point of this discussion is not to provide ‘how-to’ advice that postpones the task of writing the history of a Global Middle Ages to a moment in the future that never arrives. Rather it is to describe how we as a group of authors have *done* the global history of the Middle Ages contained in the

⁷ ‘Defining the Global Middle Ages: AHRC Network Project’ (Project number: AH/K001914/1). Funding for the initial workshop grant came from The John Fell Fund, Oxford University: ‘Towards a Global Middle Ages’.

chapters of this book. In the second half of the introduction we identify and reflect upon the principal themes that arise from our doing of global history between roughly 500 and 1500 C.E.;⁸ we end with a general set of characterisations from which we present a working hypothesis of the Global Middle Ages as a time of options and experiments.

The next two chapters also provide information and ideas that help, in distinctive ways, to frame the remainder of the volume. Mark Whittow's chapter on the sources for global history sets out the scale of the task and the (current) limitations on what we can ask those sources to yield, while also offering a robust hope that comparisons and combinations are indeed possible; an optimism that we pursue in the other chapters of this book. In Chapter 3 on global cosmologies, Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power provide important arguments on the problem of periodisation and the question of what it is that any society, including our own, means and does when it claims to be 'global'. Their approach to these issues of definition have shaped the thinking of all members of our original project network and are reflected throughout this book. Their chapter also demonstrates the indispensibility of drawing world regions outside Eurasia into our considerations of the Global Middle Ages. Together, these first three chapters sketch some of the conceptual underpinnings to the global themes and new directions charted by the chapters that follow. We intend the result to be a book which provides a framework for thinking about the Global Middle Ages in two related ways: as a period of human history with distinctive characteristics; and as a powerful concept to 'think with'.

This book is about the Global Middle Ages, but it is not just for medievalists. We seek to engage with global historians of all periods, and regional specialists from all world regions,

⁸ For further discussion of these chronological parameters and issues of periodisation see section 4 below.

whether established academics or students. In a contemporary world where western liberal certainties about the inevitability of globalisation are now challenged, we should not imagine that global thinking or acting have themselves necessarily come to an end, even if the forms of that thinking and acting are changing fast. In a present-day context of rapid transformation, historians of all periods need to rethink and expand what ‘global’ has meant in the past and might mean in the future. We also want to convey here our enthusiasm for an approach which takes all of us out of our intellectual and regional comfort zones, and has the power to give us new ways of thinking and fresh evidence bases. It is a matter of immense sadness to us that two of the project members most committed to the challenge and the enjoyment of the Global Middle Ages did not live to see this volume published. Both Glen Dudbridge and Mark Whittow were taken from us in cruel circumstances. But in what proved to be their last years, they turned with astonishingly productive fervour to global history and encouraged their colleagues to do likewise. This volume is dedicated to their memories.

1. Why think about a Global Middle Ages?

The turn to the global has been the most striking historiographical development of recent decades. The origins of this turn are difficult to locate, although late twentieth-century North America is often identified as an important incubator of interest, with Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory a powerful driver in shaping the field.⁹ But quite what ‘the field’ constitutes precisely has been notoriously difficult to determine. One consistent characteristic of this epistemological uncertainty has been a persistent battle over approaches and appropriate labels. ‘World history’, ‘international history’, ‘transnational history’ and ‘global

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 2 vols. (New York, 1974); Kenneth Pomeranz and Daniel A. Segal, ‘World History: Departures and Variations’, in Douglas Northrop (ed.), *A Companion to World History* (Oxford, 2012), 23-4; for further bibliography and discussion of the use of ‘World System’, see Glen Dudbridge’s paper in this volume.

history' are for some historians synonyms; for others, very different enterprises.¹⁰ The title and introduction to a recently published collection of essays, *The Prospect of Global History*, reflects a field still in the making.¹¹

For all this debate, however, global history has been a field with relatively little input from those working on periods before 1500. This is despite the existence of important scholarship such as Marshall Hodgson's seminal study in the 1960s and 1970s of 'Islamdom' (a wide and inter-connected Islamic world that stretched across many centuries), and Janet Abu-Lughod's presentation in the late 1980s of a late-medieval 'world system' catalysed by the expansion of the Mongols.¹² More recently Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's diachronic investigation of the pre-modern Mediterranean, *The Corrupting Sea*, has become a classic in the field of comparative maritime studies,¹³ and Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* has

¹⁰ For debate about the synonymy (or otherwise) of these terms, see C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly *et al.*, 'AHR Conversation: on Transnational History', *AHR* cxi (2006), 1441-64; Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History* xiv (2005), 421-439 draws a clear distinction between transnationalism and global history.

¹¹ James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz and Chris Wickham (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History*, (Oxford, 2016), esp. 3-22. See also Maxine Berg, *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st century* (Oxford, 2013); Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016).

¹² Marshall Hodgson, 'The Interrelations of Societies in History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v (1963) [reprt. ch. 1: *Rethinking World History* (Cambridge, 1993)]; Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1974); discussed by Richard Eaton, 'Islamic History as Global History', in Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia, 1993), esp. 22-4. On the late medieval world system: Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford/New York, 1989).

¹³ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000); Horden and Purcell, 'Mediterranean and the "New Thassology"',

shown how making formal comparisons between differently situated pre-modern societies can open up new horizons in the study of apparently familiar processes such as state formation, devotional activity and identity creation.¹⁴ But until very recently, such studies have often been isolated contributions, poorly woven into broader apprehensions of global history that have greater chronological depth.¹⁵ This habitual marginalisation of the pre-1500 global from a field that purports to deal with the large scale has been regrettable. It is well known that the

AHR, cxi (2006), 722-40, their contribution to a wider *AHR* Forum, 'Oceans of History', 171-790; W. V. Harris (ed.), *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁴ V. Lieberman, 'Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas', *Modern Asian Studies* xiii (1997), 463-546; and at greater length: *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁵ The most usual way for the pre-modern global to feature is as chapters in multi-author volumes on the comparative study of large-scale empires: e.g. John Haldon, 'The Byzantine Empire', in Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel (eds.), *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires* (Oxford, 2009), 205-54; Chris Wickham, 'Late Rome and the Islamic Caliphate', in Peter Fibiger-Bang and C. A. Bayly (eds.), *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Basingstoke, 2011), 205-13; J. Herrin and D. Angelov, 'The Christian Imperial Tradition: Greek and Latin', in P. Fibiger Bang and D. Kołodziejczyk (eds.), *Universal Empire : a Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge, 2012), 149-74. The picture is even more skewed when the global is viewed in terms of connectedness: to take one example, Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt (eds.), *The Transnational Studies Reader. Intersections and Innovations* (Abingdon, 2008), a 50-chapter reader includes only one chapter on the medieval world, by Janet Abu-Lughod ('The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor', 184-95).

kinds of phenomena often associated with global history, including dense and intense trading connections and very extensive empires, often happened *outside* Europe before 1500. In the case of the medieval centuries obvious examples include the overland Silk Roads (Map 3) and the Islamic Caliphate (Map 6) in the early medieval period; the Mongol-shaped, pan-Eurasian world system described by Abu-Lughod; a cosmopolitan medieval Indian Ocean world that joined products from China with the east coast of Africa from as early as the seventh century; and systems of connection and exchange within the American continent(s) which were no less dramatic for running as much on north-south axes as on east-west ones (Map 2).

Of course, the main reason why the pre-1500 period has played such a limited role in the field of global history is the assumption that whatever the wider capacity for travel, exchange and communication in earlier centuries, global history itself only really begins with the European voyages of discovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A particularly powerful defence of the proposition that global history should be confined to the centuries after Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492 was made by the early modern historian Jerry Bentley:

... the period roughly 1500-1800 was an age of cross-cultural interaction on a previously unprecedented scale. Increasingly during these centuries, cross-cultural interactions and exchanges influenced the ways people led their lives and organised their societies in almost all parts of planet earth. It was most certainly not the case that cross-cultural interactions had their origins in the early modern era: peoples of the eastern hemisphere, the western hemisphere and Oceania had all crossed political and cultural boundary lines since the early days of human presence on the earth, although before 1500 there was limited interaction between the world's largest geopolitical

regions. Yet, the early modern era brought almost all of the world's peoples into frequent, intense and sustained interaction with one another.¹⁶

For Bentley, 'the early modern era was a genuinely global age not so much because of any particular set of traits that supposedly characterised all or at least many lands, but rather because of historical processes that linked the world's peoples and societies in increasingly dense networks of interaction and exchange'. Those overlapping and mutually reinforcing processes after 1500 included the creation of global networks of sea lanes, global exchanges of biological species, the forging of an early capitalist global economy, all underpinned, of course, by European colonialism. The results varied from region to region but precipitated immense demographic growth, the greater diffusion of technology, and the consolidation of centralised states and imperial projects. Crucially, this was a world which 'stemmed from the European impulse to establish long-distance trading relationships' and its willingness to use force to do so.

This presentation of global history as a globalisation and modernisation process inspired by changes driven by early modern Europeans has necessarily been questioned. For many historians, this model only really applies to the world from the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century on.¹⁷ Meanwhile, scholars in disciplines outside history – in anthropology,

¹⁶ Jerry Bentley, 'Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World' in Charles H. Parker and Jerry Bentley (eds.) *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity* (Lanham, MD, 2007), 22-5; all quotations from 22.

¹⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000); Jan de Vries, 'The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World,' *Economic History Review*, lxiii (2010), 710-33, and Alan Strathern's response to the project at the end of this volume.

sociology, and economics – would push a globalised world of the sort sketched out by Bentley much later into the twentieth century.¹⁸ And, as pointed out by Pennock and Power and by Simon Yarrow in their contributions to this volume, there is now a strand of scholarship which encourages us to see ‘globalisation’ principally as a potent imaginary construct, purposeful in its intention to buttress and justify Western governing regimes of economic and political power. But for all that there is debate about the chronology of its evolution and the distribution of power within a globalised world, the basic paradigm within which those debates flourish remains stubbornly similar. It is a Europe- and North America-centred model defined primarily by the end point of globalisation, namely the triumph of the West in the modern era; and secondarily, by anxieties about that triumph: what if that end point is now over? The result is that for all the equivocation about terminology (global, world, transnational or international), overarching conceptions of the history of the planet have tended to be quite narrowly framed. A narrative of increasing integration and circulation in which European, and later North American, initiative, institutions and capital were the crucial drivers has made it difficult to incorporate any world region from before 1500 into a global history narrative, including, paradoxically, Europe itself.

Such have been the traditional barriers that have kept scholars who work on pre-modern centuries at the margins of debates about global history. Undoubtedly, this picture has begun to change in very recent years. It has now become more acceptable to speak in terms of a ‘Global Antiquity’, a ‘Global Late Antiquity’ and, of particular interest to this volume, of a

¹⁸ E.g. Arjun Appadurai, *Globalization* (Durham, NC, 2000); Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC, 2006); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, 2005).

‘Global Middle Ages’.¹⁹ This shift is partly explained by academic fashion (‘global is good’) but also by an increasing awareness of the sheer quantity of evidence available for examining connections within and between different regions of the pre-modern world. As far as the ‘medieval’ millennium before 1500 goes, that evidence base proves to be remarkably impressive, whether in the shape of written texts, tangible goods, landscape exploitation, or genetic material.²⁰

Take the diffusion of chess, for instance, a complex game with its origins in sixth-century India which, over the course of the next millennium, was transmitted across the globe. The material remains are striking. From ivory chess pieces carved in the first centuries of Islam; to the depiction of a Confucian scholar, Buddhist monk, and Daoist priest playing the game on a twelfth-century Chinese Cizhou ceramic (Map 5); to the twelfth Lewis chessmen of the same

¹⁹ In the case of ‘Global Late Antiquity’, explorations of a first great divergence, between Rome and China, have been particularly significant: Walter Scheidel, ‘From the “Great Convergence” to the “First Great Divergence”: Roman and Qin-Han State Formation and its Aftermath’, in Scheidel (ed.), *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford, 2009), 11-23; see also see recent conference and workshop initiatives in Cambridge (<http://www.crash.cam.ac.uk/programmes/late-antiquity-network-seminar-clans>); and Paris-Chicago (<https://centerinparis.uchicago.edu/sites/centerinparis.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/pdf/programmes/lundi%2018%2009%2017%20Iranian%20World%20Late%20Antiquity.pdf>); for usage of ‘The Global Middle Ages’ see 000 below.

²⁰ Although as a group we discovered that such categorisations of evidence prove to be much more multiple and porous when considered in global context (see discussion at our ‘Cultures of Recording’ workshop: http://globalmiddleages.history.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=237).

century made from walrus ivory and whales' teeth that was originally harvested in the Arctic Ocean region around Greenland, and then carved in Trondheim in Norway before being exported to the Outer Hebrides (Map 1).²¹ Meanwhile manuscript evidence depicts variants of the game being played across the medieval world: by a Japanese visitor to twelfth-century Song China; by fourteenth-century courtiers in Ilkhanid Persia; by ladies in late medieval northern European romances. The thirteenth-century manuscript of Alfonso X of Castile's 'Libro de ajedrez', incorporates Castilian translations of Arabic descriptions of the game and is illustrated with depictions of Iberian players of different social and ethnic backgrounds communicating with each other over the chessboard.²² Another striking example of long-distant connections is the fourth-century C.E. Kashmiri Buddha found in an eighth- or ninth-

²¹ For ivory chessmen from the early Islamic world see Stefano Carboni, 'Chessmen in the Department of Islamic Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art,' *Scacchi e Scienze Applicate* suppl. no. 7, fasc. 15 (1996), [XX](#). For the Cizhou ceramic:

<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/56906.html>. For the Lewis chessmen, https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/the_lewis_chessmen.aspx; N. Stratford, *The Lewis Chessmen and the Enigma of the Hoard* (London, 1997).

²² Illustrated handscroll of Minister Kibi's Trip to China, 12th c., held at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/minister-kibis-adventures-in-china-scroll-2-29078>); *Romance of Alexander*, Ms. Bodley 264 fol. 112 (Flanders, 1339-44), image accessible at http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001798873; 'Anthology of Poetry, Music and Chess for Baysunghur from Timurid Herat' (1426) from the Islamic Art and Architecture Collection at the I Tatti in Florence, with image accessible at http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ISLAMIC_DB_1039912636); Alfonso X of Castile: O. R. Constable, 'Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The *Libro de ajedrez* of Alfonso X, El Sabio,' *Speculum* 82 (2007), 301-47.

century context at Helgö in Sweden, buried in close proximity to an Irish-Insular crozier, a Carolingian sword pommel, a Coptic ladle from Egypt and a Mediterranean silver dish.²³

To these evocative early medieval cases of global interconnection we could add a Buddhist reliquary from Chaoyang in Northeast China and dated to around 1043, decorated with beads including jade probably from Khotan in the Tarim basin, a whitish coral from South or Southeast Asia, and the darker amber found around the Baltic.²⁴ At the city of Cahokia in the Mississippi Plain, artisans in the tenth to twelfth centuries worked raw materials such as copper from Lake Superior and shells from the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico into finished items found at Etowah in Georgia and the Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma.²⁵ In Australia, transcontinental trade carried mother-of-pearl from the north-west to the south coast and ochre from the west to Queensland (Map 4). And there was also an annual visit to the north-west of the Australian landmass from Sulawesi to collect sea cucumbers. Still later is the example of the pan-Eurasian and African impact of the Black Death.²⁶ And, indeed Columbus himself, with his copy of Marco Polo and awareness of the North Atlantic sea routes, was a

²³ Scott Ashley, 'Global Worlds, Local Worlds: Connections and Transformations in the Viking Age' in Fedir Androschuk, Jonathan Shepard and Monica White (eds.), *Byzantium and the Viking World* (Uppsala, 2016), 372.

²⁴ Valerie Hansen, 'International Gifting and the Kitan World, 907–1125', *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, xliii (2013), 295.

²⁵ E. E. Bowne, *Mound Sites of the Ancient South: A Guide to the Mississippian Chiefdoms* (Athens, GA, 2013), 84-6; T. R. Pauketat, *Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians* (Cambridge, 2004), 121.

²⁶ See the first issue of *The Medieval Globe* (2015); James Belich, 'The Black Death and the Spread of Europe', in Belich, Darwin et al. (eds.), *Prospect of Global History*, 93-107.

product of a medieval world that had global dimensions, without which his venture could not have been conceived or funded.²⁷

These are notable examples of interactions and common experiences in the pre-1500 period over exceptionally long distances, but they are far from isolated instances. Tens of thousands of documents and textiles recovered from the caves near Dunhuang in central Asia bear witness to the culture, communities, movements and interactions of a host of different peoples across Eurasia c. 300-1000.²⁸ More than a million fragments of text, most of them dating to c. 1000-1250, recovered in the late nineteenth century from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) and known as the Geniza, testify to the society, culture and trading activities of a far-flung network of Jewish traders.²⁹ Thousands of fragments of Chinese pottery have been found in archaeological contexts stretching from Damascus to Tanzania to Indonesia to

²⁷ Valerie Flint, *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* (Princeton, 1992); David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (New Haven, 2008), XX. J. Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (Princeton, 1999), ch. 9, suggests that Columbus only had direct contact with Marco Polo's text after his initial voyage of 1492; nonetheless he maintains that 'the indirect, long-term influence of Marco Polo is ever-present' in the thinking and actions of the admiral and his associates (quotation at 157).

²⁸ Fan Jinshi (S. Whitfield, Eng. trans), *The Caves of Dunhuang* (Hong Kong, 2010); Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road. A New History* (Oxford, 2012)..

²⁹ S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab world as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley C.A., 1967-93); J. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: the Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge, 2012); Forrest and Haour in this volume.

Australia.³⁰ Even if the technical demands of unfamiliar languages, scripts, or cultural forms mean that the close scrutiny and interpretation of such materials is still primarily a matter for regional experts, this is evidence which survives in vast quantities and is ever more frequently available to non-specialist audiences, thanks to the power of twenty-first-century communications.³¹ And even if the scale of materials found in single locations such as Dunhuang is unusual, and even if, as Whittow discusses in the next chapter, concentrations and types of evidence vary substantially between and within regions, there is nonetheless still a wealth of evidence from across the globe in the millennium before 1500 with which to examine human interactions and connections on a host of different geographical scales (local, regional, supra-regional and even planetary). Indeed, rather than a lack of available material, the greater challenge is establishing methods which allow us to interpret a complex evidence base that takes each of us so far out of our individual regional and source specialisms, and

³⁰ Angela Schottenhammer, 'China's Emergence as a Maritime Power', in John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *Cambridge History of China, volume 5 part II, Sung China, 960-1279* (2015), 495.

³¹ For Dunhuang: International Dunhuang Project (*IDP*): <http://idp.bl.uk>. For the Geniza see: the Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit: <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit>; the Friedberg Project [<http://www.genizah.org/TheCairoGenizah.aspx>]; the Princeton Project [<https://etc.princeton.edu/genizaproject/>]. Web-technology offers a helpful introduction to the multi-lingual, mid-ninth-century charters inscribed on copper which come from Kollam (Quilon) in southern India, and which provide evidence for complex patterns of exchange and commerce across the early medieval Indian Ocean world: <http://849ce.org.uk/>; https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/the_copper_plates_from_kollam.aspx

demands a range of linguistic and technical skills beyond the scope of any individual or any one lifetime.³²

Despite the scale of the evidence base, however, the Global Middle Ages is still a fledgling field. On the positive side, there are new and lively initiatives which speak either directly or indirectly to the notion of a global history for the millennium before 1500. Some, such as Lieberman's pioneering studies and the new *Medieval Worlds* journal, focus on comparison.³³

³² Which tends to contrast with globalists studying periods after c. 1800, who largely work with archives in the language of the colonisers. For collaboration among medievalists and early modernists see Patrick Boucheron *et al.* (eds.), *Histoire du monde au XVe siècle* (Paris 2009), and the commentary at: <http://blog.passion-histoire.net/?p=3150> or <http://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/?Histoire-du-monde-au-XVe-siecle>; see below 000 for further consideration of methodology.

³³ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*; Johann Arnason and Björn Wittrock, eds, *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallisations, Divergences, Renaissances* (Leiden, 2004); Walter Pohl and Andre Gingrich, 'Medieval Worlds: Introduction to the First Issue', *Medieval Worlds*, i (2015), 2-4. Comparison is usually the approach adopted by those interested in divergences: e.g. Scheidel, 'From the "Great Convergence" to the "First Great Divergence"'; see also R. I. Moore, 'The Eleventh Century in Eurasian History: A Comparative Approach to the Convergence and Divergence of Medieval Civilizations', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, xxxi (2003), 1-21; Moore, 'The Transformation of Europe as a Eurasian Phenomenon', in Arnason and Wittrock, *Eurasian Transformations*, pp.77-98; Moore, 'The Transformation of Europe As a Eurasian Phenomenon', *Medieval Encounters*, 10 (2004), 77-98; Moore, 'Medieval Europe in World History', in Carol Lansing and Edward D. English (eds.), *A Companion to the Medieval*

Others, particularly those concerned with maritime space, devote themselves more to the study of connections.³⁴ Others again, including another new journal, *The Medieval Globe*, and

World (Oxford, 2009), 563-80. See also his more recent remarks in ‘A Global Middle Ages?’, in Belich, Darwin *et al.*, *Prospect of Global History*, esp. 87-91 and ‘The First Great Divergence?’ *Medieval Worlds*, i (2015), 16-24. Comparison underpins M. Mitterauer, *Warum Europa?: Mittelalterliche Grundlagen eines Sonderwegs* (Munich, 2003). For comparison less focused on the exceptionality of Europe, see Anne Haour, *Rulers, Warriors, Traders and Clerics: the Central Sahel and the North Sea* (Oxford, 2007). Comparison is also central to Hilde De Weerd’s, ‘Communication and Empire. Chinese Empires in Comparative Context’, a European Research Council-funded project: <http://www.chinese-empires.eu/>

³⁴ An emphasis on connection is made by John Coatsworth, Juan Cole *et al.*, *Global Connections, Politics, Exchange, and Social Life in World History, Vol. 1: To 1500* (Cambridge, 2015), 1-9, and by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World* (Cambridge, 2015), esp. ch. 3. The Indian Ocean has been a particular focus of the study of maritime interconnections in the medieval and early modern periods: K. N. Chaudhury, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985); A. LaViolette, ‘Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600-1500’, *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, i (2008), 24-49. In addition to the Kollam plates project (above n. X), there is the diachronic Sealinks project which includes a strong emphasis on the medieval centuries (see the very useful bibliographical section: http://www.sealinksproject.com/?page_id=22). On connectivity in the Mediterranean, Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, remains the crucial starting point. For the Atlantic see Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589* (Cambridge, 2012). For connectivities in smaller maritime spaces

the medieval volume of the new *Cambridge World History* series, are open to both approaches.³⁵ Environmental change across this period is the subject of ever increasing scrutiny, with Bruce Campbell and Victor Lieberman in particular seeking to explain how socio-economic shifts across Eurasia in the later medieval centuries can be connected to the transition from the Medieval Climate Anomaly (c. pre-1250) to the Little Ice Age.³⁶ In a closely related development, the pan-Eurasian experience of disease, above all plague, has

see, for example, David Bates and Robert Liddiard (eds.), *East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2013).

³⁵ Benjamin Z. Kedar and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *The Cambridge World History*, Vol. V, *Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE- 1500 CE* (Cambridge, 2015) [henceforth *CWH*, V]; there is also in practice a mixed economy of comparison as well as connection in Coatsworth, Cole *et al.* *Global Connections, Politics ... To 1500*. Comparison, but also the impact of connectivity, and particularly the role of changes on the edges of the Islamic world, are fundamental to considerations of the contemporaneous development of the vernacular across medieval Eurasia: Sheldon Pollock, 'The Transformation of Culture-Power In Indo-Europe, 1000-1300', *Medieval Encounters*, x (2004), 247-78. There are, of course, other journals which also have a long-standing record of putting different world cultures into conversation with each other: for instance, *Al-Masaq*; *The Medieval History Journal*; *Medieval Encounters*.

³⁶ Victor Lieberman, 'Charter State Collapse in Southeast Asia, ca. 1250-1400, as a Problem in Regional and World History', *AHR*, cxvi (2011), 937-63; Lieberman with Brendan Buckley, 'The Impact of Climate on Southeast Asia, c. 950-1820: New Findings,' *Modern Asian Studies*, xlvii (2012), pp.1049-96; Bruce M. S. Campbell, *The Great Transition. Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2016).

been the subject of recent collaborative projects.³⁷ But welcome as these developments are, there is still much to be done. As Whittow suggests in his chapter on sources, causal connections between evidence for environmental change and transformations in other spheres of human activity are not always easy to discern.³⁸ More significantly still, it is striking that in much recent research on the Global Middle Ages the focus remains primarily on Eurasia with far less attention being paid to the place of Africa (Map 7) or the Americas, let alone Australasia or the Pacific.³⁹

Sounding a negative note is not, of course, to ignore the long traditions of very substantial scholarship by regional specialists on the history of different world regions, including those outside Eurasia, in the pre-1500 centuries. Rather, our point is that current ‘global’ or ‘world’ histories of that period afford relatively little space to areas beyond Eurasia, despite the quite evident connections between some of these regions and Eurasia as well as comparable socio-economic and political developments across the globe. The result of the marginalisation of areas outside Eurasia can all too easily turn into a reading of the millennium before 1500 as one in which Africa and the Americas fell behind Europe and Asia in terms of political development and technological and commercial exchange, creating a context against which

³⁷ *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World. Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica Green, *The Medieval Globe* i (2014). Note also the European Research Council-funded project: ‘Medplag: The Medieval Plagues: Ecology, Transmission Modalities and Routes of the Infections’, based at the University of Oslo: <http://www.mn.uio.no/cees/english/research/projects/650125/index.html>; on plague also note Shepard in this vol.

³⁸ The amount of work needed to substantiate such connections is reflected in, for instance, Ling Zhang, *The River, the Plain, and the State: an Environmental Drama in Northern Song China, 1048-1128* (Cambridge, 2016).

³⁹ E.g. Arnason and Wittrock, *Eurasian Transformations; CWH*, v; Campbell, *Great Transition*, 27, where England is described as ‘the default case’.

Asian prosperity followed by European maritime expansion and eventual global dominance then appears inevitable.⁴⁰

There are, of course, many causes for the marginalisation of regions outside Eurasia (and indeed of some regions within Eurasia, especially the northern reaches). Aside from often unacknowledged assumptions of cultural superiority, the most important reason, as discussed in the next chapter, is the marked disparities in surviving evidence types. It is not necessarily that less evidence on aggregate survives in one world region than in another; more that we may think it easier to discuss certain types of human behaviour if we have access to particular kinds of records. Thus, we *could* argue that the internal workings of ruling elites do not always emerge easily or in detail in some parts of Africa or the Americas where we are primarily reliant on archaeological data as they do in some parts of Eurasia where there is a thickness of surviving written records. And yet, as is demonstrated in several of our chapters, regions without written records quite clearly had sophisticated ruling elites, were often characterised by citted cultures, and frequently had their own forms of record keeping.⁴¹ In this volume we acknowledge that getting disparate evidence bases to ‘speak’ to each other is a significant challenge. We must, of course, be attentive to the regional specificities of evidence and its production, whether in terms of genre, compositional practices, or medium: manuscripts, imprints, inscriptions, *kipus*, pictographs requiring oral elucidation, and objects.⁴² But marginalisation of entire world regions from long periods of human history is

⁴⁰ Coatsworth, Cole *et al.*, *Global Connections, Politics ...To 1500*, particularly ch. 9, 256-7; see also below 000.

⁴¹ Conrad Leyser, Naomi Standen and Stephanie Wynne-Jones on settlements; Hilde De Weerd, Catherine Holmes and John Watts on politics; Jonathan Shepard on networks.

⁴² E.g. Gwen Bennett and Naomi Standen, ‘Historical and Archaeological Views of the Liao (10th to 12th Centuries) Borderlands in Northeast China’, in David Mullin (ed.), *Places in*

not the answer to the evidence conundrum. One of the objectives and characteristic features of our volume is to afford more coverage to evidence bases and to interpretative models from *outside* Eurasia, and just as importantly to integrate such evidence and interpretation into our overall thinking about the Global Middle Ages, rather than seeing non-Eurasian regions as, at best, merely adjuncts to an essentially Eurasian story.⁴³

2. Conceptual challenges

As we have seen above, the sheer weight of evidence may have blunted the claims of some early modernists that the period before 1500 was not interconnected enough to be considered global. More challenging for those of us interested in the shape and potential of the ‘Global Middle Ages’ is the charge that there is a serious problem with the ‘medieval’ part of that term, and above all its association with the ‘global’.

At the softer end of a spectrum of criticism is the contention that the term ‘medieval’ is simply too imprecise to be used to describe even the history of Europe for the millennium before 1500, let alone that of the entire globe. Most historians of Europe prefer to divide the ‘medieval’ into early, central/high and late. Others lack confidence in a term mobilised so freely by nineteenth-century European nation-building projects.⁴⁴ Some warn against reintroducing ‘medieval’ or ‘Middle Ages’ as a term in global history, preferring less

Between: the Archaeology of Social, Cultural and Geographical Borders and Borderlands (Oxford, 2011), 80-98.

⁴³ See section on methodology below.

⁴⁴ For a wide-ranging critique of ‘medieval’ see T. Reuter, ‘Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct’, in Janet Nelson (ed.) *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities. Timothy Reuter*, (Cambridge, 2006), 19-37. On the association of periodisation and macro-political change in modern Europe, see David Matthew, *Medievalism. A Critical History* (Cambridge, 2015); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty. How Ideas about Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008).

politically charged labels such as the era of great ‘Intensification’ or ‘Diversification’.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, for many scholars working on regions outside Europe in roughly the 500-1500 time-frame, the term ‘medieval’ is simply too closely associated with the European experience to be appropriate. Some may be willing to accept ‘medieval’ as a neutral label of convenience and as less pernicious than labels such as ‘post-classical’, but others reject it outright.⁴⁶

For other critics of the Global Middle Ages, the principal problem is the combination of ‘global’ and ‘medieval’ in the same formula. Thus, there are those who acknowledge connections or comparisons over the *longue durée* before 1500, and who might even allow these to be called ‘global’, but who nonetheless fear that the purpose of investigating this global deep past is merely to provide a pre-story for five hundred years of Western colonial dominance characterised by globalised networks of trade, human migration, and oppressive politics. Thus:

The idea of a superstitious, religious, feudal, backward, irrational, static Middle Ages did not preexist the colonial subject upon which it became mapped. To the contrary,

⁴⁵ See especially the critique of R. I. Moore (see above n. 000); Reuter, ‘Medieval’, 31-7.

⁴⁶ For unease about the use of ‘medieval’ with regard to the Islamic world, see, e.g., D. M. Varisco, ‘Making “Medieval” Islam Meaningful’, *Medieval Encounters*, xiii (2007), 385-412. Acceptance of the term ‘medieval’ is somewhat more widespread among those working in Europe and North America on the Chinese world in the centuries 300-1000: note in this context the journal *Early Medieval China*, and David Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (London, 2002). In China itself the entire period before 1949 with written texts is called ‘ancient’ *gudai* 古代.

the temporalized characteristics attributed to the Middle Ages emerged from and advanced the process of identifying and ruling colonized subjects. At the same time, this process helped to underwrite European nationalist histories as well as the entire edifice of Orientalism. The becoming medieval of the centuries apportioned to the Middle Ages, in other words, was a regulative process providing ideological support for practices with material, economic, political and institutional effects ... effects that are fully entwined with the conditions of globalization today... Indeed the identification of the Middle Ages as a global era preceding 1500 may have the unintended effect of not only masking crucial aspects of this history but also corroborating its narrative logic.⁴⁷

Our response to these criticisms is not to deny them entirely. Some of the post-colonialist critique is justified and requires careful thought and navigation as Pennock/Power and Yarrow elaborate more fully in their contributions to this volume. Certainly, the terms ‘global’ and ‘globalisation’ are often used synonymously in much global history, including by those with pre-1500 interests.⁴⁸ This can lead to the privileging of some themes over others: large-scale empires, macro-economic change and long-distance trade often trump social, cultural and gender topics.⁴⁹ In other instances, persuaded by the argument that it was only in

⁴⁷ Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett, ‘Periodization and “The Medieval Globe”’: A Conversation, *The Medieval Globe*, ii (2015), 2; see also Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, 2006); Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (eds.), *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World. The Idea of “the Middle Ages” Outside Europe* (Baltimore, 2009).

⁴⁸ For instance, Coatsworth, Cole et al. *Global Connections, Politics ...To 1500*, 1-9.

⁴⁹ A point also made by Kedar and Wiesner-Hanks, *CWH*, V, *Expanding Webs*, xxii.

the early modern or modern periods that we can talk of intense and dense patterns of long-distance interaction and exchange, scholars such as Chris Wickham and R.I. Moore have suggested that a comparative methodology is the most useful global approach for those working on the pre-1500 centuries.⁵⁰ For others more willing to interpret the long-term global in terms of connections, the logic of the globalisation narrative can lock the study of large areas of the world into a model in which they are either ignored or seen as losers in a competition to keep up with European and, later, with north American models of industrialisation and colonisation. Thus China is praised for its advanced state in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, while its subsequent falling behind the West occasions much head-scratching, and sometimes triumphalism. Even if the moment of western triumph is now more usually dated to the early nineteenth century, this debate based on the premise of competition between the ancestors of present-day nation-states has encouraged some global medievalists to use ‘divergence’ as a tool for examining the trajectories of different Eurasian societies whether in late antiquity or in the centuries after 1000.⁵¹ Of course a focus on ‘divergence’ does not have to entail denigration of any of the parties compared, even if it is susceptible to the charge of using the European experience as the norm. But it can result in a discussion which focuses on the two ends of Eurasia and pays scant regard to the large area in between

⁵⁰ For Moore see note 000 above; Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Medieval Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005); ‘Jiangnan Style: Doing Global Economic History in the Medieval Period’, in John Arnold, Matthew Hilton and Jan R ger (eds.), *History after Hobsbawm* (Oxford, 2018).

⁵¹ For a later rather than earlier dating of a divergence between the West and China, see in the first instance Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*. His arguments have not been universally accepted: see, for instance, Philip Huang’s review article, ‘Development or Involution in Eighteenth-Century Britain and China?’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, lxi (2002), 501-38; Patrick O’Brien, ‘Ten Years of Debate on the Origins of the Great Divergence’.

(<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>). For medievalists’ use of ‘divergence’, see above n. 000.

and beyond: the rest of Asia (central, south, south-east, west), the Eurasian steppes, Africa, the Americas, Australasia, and the Pacific. These become regions with indeed peoples, but without history.⁵² Very recently more attention has started to focus on the global history of such areas, but problems surely remain if the principal way in which the medieval history of such places can be rehabilitated is by demonstrating that they too experienced some sort of early globalisation, or indeed that they were the progenitors of modern globalisation.⁵³

We do not endorse the development of a Global Middle Ages on terms set by the globalisation narrative. We acknowledge the depth of the problems that the post-colonial critique reveals and we do not seek to promote simplistic solutions to those difficulties. For instance, some medievalists with post-colonialist concerns who are more positively-disposed towards the idea of globalising the Middle Ages have suggested that this approach might be a way of seeking out and amplifying the multiple voices of those colonised either by modern Europeans or by normative Western historiographies. But this apparently benign intention can itself be hazardous. It may be encouraging to say that Asia, Africa and the Middle East should be included, but this declaration becomes backhanded if these areas are then treated only as parts of an ‘intersecting, mutating, *incommensurable*’ collection of regions. The risk here is the acceptance of these regions into the Middle Ages only if they are demonstrably different from Europe, a position which paradoxically maintains the normative character of the European Middle Ages as the ones that really count. To speak of ‘the necessary project of opening medieval studies to medieval India, Africa, China, and the Islamic world’ is equally

⁵² The reference, of course, is to Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, 1997), now in its second edition (2010).

⁵³ A strong emphasis in Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads. A New History of the World* (London, 2015).

well intentioned, but highlights the primarily European focus of ‘Medieval Studies’, and can easily seem condescending to those who study medieval India, Africa, China and the Islamic world, which have their own historiographies and methodologies, debates and problems, as well as their own periodisations that rarely map neatly onto the ‘middle millennium’ of the western Middle Ages.⁵⁴ Parts of the world in parts of the ‘middle millennium’ were indeed incommensurable with others, but in different times and places we can also observe remarkable similarities. Such diversity is surely what we would expect, but to allow it to come into view we have to displace Europe not only as the central object of study but also as the core of our Problematik.

There are important objections, then, to the Global Middle Ages; but in this volume we argue that these problems are not insuperable. The world in the millennium before 1500 was not only extraordinarily complex and diverse but, crucially, it was multi-centred and western Europe was, at best, one region among many: no single region held a hegemonic position over the rest. This world did not know it was ‘before’ anything, although there were sometimes people who were conscious of being ‘after’ something, usually (although not exclusively)

⁵⁴ Quotations from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Introduction. Midcolonial’, in Cohen (ed.), *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York and Basingstoke, 2000), pp.7-8 (emphasis added).

Cohen was himself aware that the texts analysed by the contributors to this book, as well as those contributors’ discursive mode of analysis, intellectual points of departure, and objectives (e.g. ‘the decolonization of “Europe” from within’; to ‘demonstrat[e] the violences and internal colonizations upon which Englishness was founded’) somewhat paradoxically maintained the focus on Europe itself: ‘... the non-Christian Middle Ages were being approached mainly through European contact and colonization’ (Cohen, ‘Introduction’, 8).

those within elites who sought legitimacy by looking back to earlier forms of authority.⁵⁵ One of our central preoccupations is to identify the behaviours, rules, systems, beliefs, practices and so on that made this world what it was in its own terms and in its own time, without reference to futures unknown to contemporaries. The contributors to the chapters that we present here have sought to understand this world in terms that might have made sense to contemporaries themselves as a means of developing a fresh conceptual framework for treating global history before 1500. We do not intend, therefore, to reposition the world before 1500 as a response to the theoretical problems identified by post-colonialist critics that surround the term ‘medieval’. Instead our goal is to treat the Global Middle Ages as a distinctive period *and* as an analytical approach with its own agenda and momentum.

Readers may ask why we have chosen to focus on the millennium before 1500 rather than adopting a much wider pre-modern focus, ranging from antiquity through to as late as the eighteenth century, particularly given recent theoretical discussion of the pre-modern as well as the suggestions about continuities between the Global Middle Ages and the Global Early Modern made by Alan Strathern in our final paper.⁵⁶ Our first answer is that our millennial boundaries are in practice very flexible: the Global Middle Ages is an umbrella term for a collection of more specifically demarcated periodisations, with the exact chronological parameters of each depending on the global topic under consideration; that is to say, quite clearly global topics may at times require terminal dates that begin before 500 C.E. or may

⁵⁵ See comments in Shepard’s concluding remarks on the potency, potentially across all social groups, of the half-remembered or even imagined past; see also the idea of ‘charter polities’ developed by Lieberman in *Strange Parallels*.

⁵⁶ Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock (eds.), *Deep History. The Architecture of Past and Present* (Los Angeles, 2011); Smail and Shryock, ‘History and the “Pre”’, *AHR*, cxviii (2013), 709-37.

need to stretch well beyond 1500 (see further discussion below in section 4).⁵⁷ Our second response is more conceptual: as we will go on to argue in the rest of this introduction, the Global Middle Ages may be an umbrella term, and it may under certain circumstances be usefully regarded as a subset of a broader pre-modern global world, but we also see it as a period with its own striking characteristics. As we outline in sections 5 and 6 of this chapter, these characteristics can serve to distinguish the Global Middle Ages from periods which came earlier as well as later. But integral to our understanding of how and why the Global Middle Ages can be identified as a distinctive period is the method of rooting ourselves in regional evidence that we used to derive its defining characteristics. As we explain in the next section, those methods involved working from the evidence outwards rather than by fetishising predetermined chronological boundaries.

3. Approaching the Global Middle Ages by challenging eurocentricity: the need for collaborative methods

Central to our understanding of the Global Middle Ages as both a period with identifiable characteristics – even if specific elements require fluid and varied temporal boundaries – and as an approach with its own themes and conceptual underpinnings, are the working methods we developed within the group of scholars who made up ‘Defining the Global Middle Ages’, the project from which this volume developed. This original group included historians and archaeologists with expertise in the evidence bases and historiographies of a variety of pre-1500 world regions: central and eastern Eurasia, south and southeast Asia, western Europe, the Mediterranean, as well as Africa and the Americas. That said, the group still remained somewhat skewed towards specialists on western Europe and China, and we had no expert on

⁵⁷ ‘Global topics’ in our approach are the themes treated in this book (e.g. networks, trust, value etc.) but they could include others.

the Pacific.⁵⁸ At thirty-three original members, of whom around twenty-four proved the most active contributors, our project group was quite large.⁵⁹ There was an even gender balance among the project's regular members, although all but a couple of participants were white Europeans, a feature we regret, and have taken as a prompt for achieving more balance in the future.⁶⁰ We initially considered periodisation, as well as the utility of analytical categories that are commonly deployed in the study of global history such as 'empire', 'divergence' and 'religion'. Having discovered that many of these categories did not relate all that closely or powerfully to our medieval evidence bases or contexts, in later workshops we moved on to consider networks and cultures of recording, where analytical approach and medieval evidence enjoyed more fruitful interactions.⁶¹

Our methods were ostensibly very familiar: we emphasised discussion over presentation, sat round the same table, and had generous tea, lunch and dinner breaks. But a couple of additional tweaks turned out to enhance significantly what we could achieve. First, in each

⁵⁸ We regret that these omissions reduced the diversity of what we could consider. We sought to fill gaps by inviting guest speakers to some of our meetings, including Nile Green and André Wink (specialists in the Islamic world and especially South Asia), Emily Umberger (pre-modern Mesoamerica) and Matthew Davies (Central and East Africa). As will become apparent, the way this volume was put together made it infeasible to commission fresh papers from people who were not already immersed in our working methods. We are clear about the need for fuller coverage in future collaborations. We note also the structural constraints revealed by the requirements of external funding, which in this case meant our core group had to be UK-based, giving us, at best, a handful of specialists to call upon for each of the pre-Columbian Americas and pre-colonial Africa, and fewer East and South Asianists than one might have hoped.

⁵⁹ See appended list.

⁶⁰ The project timetable also took into account the happy arrival of nine babies into the families of network members, including Arthur, Clara, Edward, Evelyn, Giles, Jacob, Morris and Rowan.

⁶¹ See 'Defining the Global Middle Ages' workshop reports:

http://globalmiddleages.history.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=19.

cluster of presentations on any topic we ensured geographical spread among the presenters, so that we could maximise the juxtapositions offered by the diversity of our specialisms. This meant that we consistently integrated discussion of Africa and the Americas from the outset, and that we were actively committed to investigating a global medieval past that was not simply another form of Eurasian history shaped by primarily eurocentric debates: indeed the group cultivated a hortatory hostility to any such approach. The non-Eurasian presence often compelled the group to think again about matters which from a Eurasian perspective could seem settled.⁶² Moving beyond Eurasia also highlighted the need to pay close attention to material as well as written evidence. Our experience was that for any theme to work globally, we consistently had to transcend or recast a vocabulary and set of assumptions that are, in general, too Eurasian, and especially too western European. Happily, developing new vocabularies and thinking more explicitly about often long-held assumptions generated a positive feedback loop; such strategies helped us to see the regions with which we are each most familiar in quite different ways. Second, we ensured that all of our participants presented regularly, so that everyone got to know something of everyone else's research interests. The familiarity fostered over three years then permitted us to take shortcuts where understanding could be presumed, and ensured that we avoided unproductive topics. Thus rather than constantly returning to the problems of the term 'medieval' and the difficulties of regional periodisations that do not map easily on to one another, we trusted each other and suspended those particular debates in the interests of exploring what might be jointly discoverable. As a result we sustained a dynamic conversation which not only led to a critique of existing approaches to the global (on which see, in particular, Pennock and Power, Yarrow, and

⁶² See, for instance, the discussion of 'super-ordinate centres' in the 'Empires' session of the project workshop on 'Historiography', and of the scope and nature of 'writing' during the workshop on 'Recording Cultures': http://globalmiddleages.history.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=19.

Dudbridge in this volume) but also to the development of a shared critical vocabulary and conceptual building blocks.

In one sense these outcomes were achieved through sharing regional expertise with trusted and receptive colleagues; but in fact it is not all that simple to assemble a range of experts, and then to get those assembled to talk to each other across disciplinary and regional boundaries, trusting in each others' goodwill. Presentations were often based on tentative ideas or incomplete research, and in discussion kites were frequently flown.⁶³ By adopting these open-ended, highly experimental working methods, rather than by making a premature commitment to global models from other periods or by devoting ourselves to a theoretical deconstruction of 'medieval', we were able to discover contours and parameters without having any sense of what they would look like at the beginning of our project. Such academic practices are characterised by a high degree of intellectual, even reputational, risk: it is easy to appear or feel stupid when we move away from our core specialisms. But we believe such pragmatics have important implications for the pursuit of global history by regional specialists of all periods, not just the medieval. It is not just that open-ended, cross-regional collaboration allows us to accumulate more information. More important is the acknowledgement that one scholar alone cannot achieve the breadth and range of viewpoints needed to make serious inroads against the dominance of any single perspective.

Collaboration across contexts also averts the charge sometimes levelled at global history, that it is prey to gross over-simplification and reductionism (as discussed in the introductory remarks of De Weerdt, Holmes and Watts). We need each other to remain challenged; even to

⁶³ Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Experiment in Collaborative Humanities, or Imagining the World, 500–1500 C.E.*, *English Language Notes* 47.1 (2009), 205-16, also notes the value of a 'culture of fearless discussion' when considering the Global Middle Ages.

keep us honest, not just after publication of our results in the shape of reviews, but while we are actually doing our research and writing it up. It is in this sense that we advocate the indispensability of collaborative methods, most notably in the field of global history, but also in other fields of historical study as well.

The routine sharing of expertise during the workshops enabled us to access the latest thinking in a wide range of different regional fields, a practice which then allowed us to address the nuance and details of specific interactions, relationships and choices as they related to, affected and were influenced by wider – global – phenomena. Transferring this bottom-up approach to the chapters we present here, we have opted to begin with the local and then look out, rather than starting from the more usual ‘globalisation’ narrative and only then looking in. In this sense we are simply doing solid empirical history, but we adopt a global perspective by co-writing with colleagues in different specialisms or by drawing directly upon the network’s regional expertise when working as solo authors.

While connection and comparison have been important methods in the study of global history, we take a somewhat different approach, one we call *combinative*.⁶⁴ Our papers are not concerned with the usual dialogue between theory and evidence over a period of change, so much as with the juxtaposition of evidence from diverse locations and centuries which speaks to the chapter theme in question. This approach has allowed us to retain the specificity which

⁶⁴ On comparison and connection see the introduction to Belich, Darwin *et al.*, *Prospect of Global History*; see also above 000. Cf. Julia McClure’s discussion of ‘correlative’ method in ‘Religious Exemption and Global History before 1300 – Closing Comments’, in Charles West, ed. *Religious Exemption in Pre-Modern Eurasia, c. 300-1300 CE, Medieval Worlds*, 6 (2017), 273.

is such an important part of historical method, but which is often lost in overarching approaches to world history, and then to leverage localised and detailed cases to offer pointers towards global phenomena. By working collaboratively we have been able to treat each of our empirical cases from perspectives of regional and period expertise, both our own and that drawn from other network members, so that all of these papers use examples or insights from the primary research of the authors or other project colleagues. This has allowed us first, to seek similarities that would not be discernible readily, or at all, to non-experts, and second, to identify from ‘insider’ positions where those similarities might reach their limits. Most importantly, it has allowed us to shape a set of categories for our analyses that are not beholden to existing global history frameworks. As Pennock and Power put it in their chapter on cosmologies, our cases serve as ‘lenses’ through which to see new outlines. The combination of examples that are thematically cognate but which do not necessarily match precisely in terms of time, place or formal characteristics, allows us to follow threads which can help us discern features of the Global Middle Ages.

This approach enables us to seek what is distinctive about our period without being compelled to slot it into a standard, preordained or singular narrative. Alan Strathern played a valued role in our project group, not least as a consistent critic of our disinclination to engage with grand narrative; a bracing critique which he takes up in his remarks here about the wider enterprise of defining the Global Middle Ages.⁶⁵ We suggest, however, that what we gain from our avoidance of grand narrative, at least in the early stages of research, is a method of opening up themes and topics that step outside the usual framings and analytical categories. We do not suggest for an instant that our theme-based chapters are anything but initial forays into areas that need substantial amounts of additional research. But they do place on the page project

⁶⁵ Remarks formulated principally in response to the original network meetings rather than to the papers gathered here.

members' willingness to take intellectual risks and actually get on with trying to 'do' medieval global history.

In making our juxtapositions we have not been greatly concerned to seek either diachronic development – perhaps an indirect outcome of avoiding a teleological towards-globalisation approach – or synchronic correspondence. Our cases thus subsist in a tension between two issues of periodisation. On the one hand there is an implicit contrast between the situations we examine and other periods; usually, but not always, the modern (which can never be escaped entirely). On the other hand we make concerted efforts to consider the thinking and behaviour of people in our diverse cases on their own terms. The need – at least at present – to resist the teleology of modernity and work against the dominant globalisation narrative has led us to describe systems, processes, structures, networks and so on that are captured in a medieval moment. This moment might be a fleeting instance of face-to-face political communication as discussed in the papers by De Weerd, Holmes and Watts on political mediation or by Standen and White on mobility, or it might extend for centuries, as in the networks of trust represented by the Geniza and the Silk Roads, discussed more fully in the papers by Forrest and Haour and by Shepard. It is clear that each theme has its own chronology, although in most cases we do no more than acknowledge that here, and do not try to specify dates. But as expressed with particular force in Pennock and Power's discussion of globalising cosmologies, even when the actors in our chapters do something that is very familiar from later times, or when there are recurrences from earlier times, we see these people acting in accordance with their *own* immediacies, deep-rooted drivers and individuality.

We believe that our methods facilitate thinking about topics on a 'global' scale *and* as representative of a 'medieval' world, without obviating the question by artificially specifying

the content of either of these containers ahead of time. That is to say, while we are sceptical about the fit between many standard global history frameworks ('empire', 'divergence', 'trade', etc) and the medieval world, we are also cautious about trying to identify categories 'indigenous' to the medieval, since we must start from the presumption that these too could have varied over time and space. Our chapters instead develop themes which were generated by the exchange of material and views during our project workshops. These are themes which focus on the social interactions of medieval contemporaries and their needs and requirements, such as networks, mobility, value, trust, political mediation, resources, cosmologies.⁶⁶ More conventional historical categories such as religion, gender, the environment, trade and states appear as threads running through a number of chapters, but they should not be mistaken for overall themes. Taken as a whole the chapters offer us a view of quotidian process and praxis at a global level, in terms derived from combinative analysis of specific cases.

For our authors, it is crucial that Africa, the Americas, and on occasion Australasia and the Pacific, are as integral as Eurasia to our presentation of the Global Middle Ages. In some cases (Whittow on sources, Yarrow on value, Shepard on networks) something close to global coverage is achieved by the examination of a wide range of examples. In others, including Forrest and Haour on trust, Standen and White on mobilities, Leyser, Standen and Wynne-Jones on settlements, and Pennock and Power on cosmologies, breadth of geographical focus is achieved by authors with different geographical expertise having deliberately sought to put regionally-specific case studies from different continents into conversation. In the case of the chapter on settlements, the model of the city underpinned by African archaeological evidence is used to challenge dominant assumptions about the urban that derive from the Eurasian

⁶⁶ For further discussion of collaborative method in global history see also Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, 'Defining the Global Middle Ages', *Medieval Worlds*, i (2015), 106-117.

experience. In other chapters where a more exclusively Eurasian evidence base is at issue, such as De Weerd, Holmes and Watts on politics, the ‘fit’ between Eurasian-derived conclusions and other world regions is explored in concluding comments. We acknowledge that our attempts to make global mean global in a full planetary sense may be only partially fulfilled, which has made us all determined to extend the geographical range of future projects; we hope that in the meantime our combined efforts demonstrate ways in which the Global Middle Ages can mean more than simply the connected or comparative history of medieval Eurasia.

In the second half of this introduction we identify some characteristics of a Global Middle Ages as they emerge, with their different chronologies, in our thematic chapters. From there, and without seeking a new grand narrative, we go on to offer a working hypothesis that the Global Middle Ages was a period of intensification offering options for experiment in ways that we will argue place it in contrast to later centuries.

4. What were the Global Middle Ages?

In our view the least helpful way to think about the Global Middle Ages is by a sustained consideration of dating.⁶⁷ Of course, in our comments thus far we have spoken loosely about the Global Middle Ages as the thousand years before c. 1500 C.E., a period that some historians (including Whittow here) have come to call ‘the middle millennium’.⁶⁸ But precise reification of this millennium using concrete dates does not ultimately seem either feasible or intellectually fruitful. If we take a starting point of 500 C.E., notionally the end of the Roman empire, then we immediately run into problems. The difficulty is not so much that specialists within the fields of Late Antiquity and Byzantine studies cannot decide how, when or even whether this empire ended; instead the more pressing point is that beyond the

⁶⁷ As a project group we devoted an entire workshop to periodisation, but found it impossible to identify which centuries mark the boundaries of the Middle Ages on a global scale: http://globalmiddleages.history.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=110.

⁶⁸ Kedar and Wiesner-Hanks, *CWH, V, Expanding Webs*, 1; see Whittow, 00 below.

post-Roman world of western Eurasia, the turn of the fifth-sixth centuries do not obviously relate to any complex of significant changes that resonate at a global level. Indeed, if we were to seek conjunctions of major shifts in disparate parts of the globe, then the third, fourth, seventh and eighth centuries C.E. might all have stronger credentials as the beginning of a Global Middle Ages, as the examples listed below suggest.

Third century

Fall of the Han

Division of the Roman Empire

Spread of Sanskrit culture

Beginnings of Classic Maya civilisation including interactions with Teotihuacan

Fourth century

Rise of Aksum in Ethiopia

Founding of the Gupta

Expansion of Buddhism out of India

Roman emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity

Expansion of Polynesian exploration and settlement

Seventh century

Advent and expansion of Islam

Collapse of the Persian empire

Beginning of the extension of Sinitic empire and culture

Bantu migration to southern Africa

Eighth century

Establishment of the Muisca civilisation in the Andes

Collapse of Classic Maya civilisation

Founding of the Pala empire in Bengal

Found of the Rashtrakuta empire in the Deccan

An Lushan rebellions in Tang China

Advent of the Carolingians in western Europe.

If 500 does not really work as a solid bookend, then the same may also be said of the other end of the middle millennium. The title to our volume invokes 1492, but clearly cases could also be made for earlier endpoints such as the creation of the pan-Eurasian Mongol empire in the thirteenth century or the advent of the transatlantic slave trade in the sixteenth.

Choosing among the numerous dating options is clearly anything but arbitrary, since much depends where and on what we focus our attention and, as Pennock and Power emphasise, the situatedness of the historian making the choice. In part such a decision is a matter of regional specialism; but it is also a matter of thematic interest. For the historian of the institutions and concepts associated with large territorial empires or world religions, important terminus dates may (although do not have to) be very important, although precisely which dates matter will depend on the empire or religion in question. But for the authors in this book, whose focus is on quotidian social interaction, the need to find precise terminal dates is much less pressing. Periodisation is then a tool, and one that may not be right for all jobs. Our preference is to see the Global Middle Ages in flexible terms, with terminal dates, as we have argued above, shifting according to the phenomenon under examination (see sections 2 and 3).

Rather than focusing on dates, our chapters suggest that a more productive approach comes if we focus on what people actually did, and on how and why they did it. Let us begin with mobility and networks. We are far from alone in observing the fundamental importance of mobility in global history, but we take its significance a step further. Mobility was not only the province of particular types of medieval people (migrants, nomads, rulers, merchants, pilgrims) undertaking specific, often elite-focused, activities but, as discussed here by Standen and White, a phenomenon that played a crucial structural and structuring role in

almost every area of life, including resource-gathering, politics, religious practices, ‘and perhaps, in the end, everything’. Not just ‘everything’ indeed, but everyone. Mobility was integral to the processes of political mediation discussed by De Weerd, Holmes and Watts; it demanded methods for creating trust as discussed by Forrest and Haour. Movement was central to the trans-regional world system that Dudbridge argues connected east Asia and the Islamic world of the seventh to tenth centuries. It was movement, too, that created, delimited, maintained, and reshaped the networks described by Shepard, who focuses on, but does not limit himself to, the pre-modern land-based and maritime Silk Roads; networks which he sees not simply in economic terms but also as characterised by ‘cultural, religious and kinship “pulses”’. Of course, as Shepard explains, networks in any period, but above all the pre-modern, are notoriously difficult to define, even to describe. However, notwithstanding problems of definition, in common with many other historians of global history we find thinking about networks and the behaviours associated with them very fruitful, whether we are interested in bringing out the significance in the medieval world of non-state-orientated collectivities, or in thinking about the operation and maintenance of different forms of high power.⁶⁹ But in line with our ideas about mobilities, we see networks not only as infrastructures accessible primarily by the wealthy and designed to serve elites, but as having a structural and all-encompassing character that implicated all parts of the societies they touched.

Shepard helpfully divides the things that moved through networks into objects, people and ideas. In terms of objects we may think most readily of material luxuries such as silk, aromatics, precious metals and fine manufactures like glass and high-end ceramics, but it would be a mistake to imagine that these were all for tiny elite audiences or always exchanged

⁶⁹ De Weerd, Holmes and Watts; Standen and White; Leyser, Standen and Wynne-Jones.

in small quantities. As Nicholas Purcell has argued recently with respect to pre-modern traffic in incense, the ingredients for this aromatic came from places as far apart as Yemen, the tropical forests of insular Southeast Asia, the East African coast and, we might add, were also found in Mesoamerica.⁷⁰ Incense was highly valuable but not restricted to social elites. Everyone, at least in the greater Eurasian world, experienced the smell of incense, particularly in religious settings, and because it was only needed in tiny amounts it was affordable even for the non-elite.⁷¹ Clearly incense was not a subsistence item in modern terms, but it was deemed necessary by its purchasers, for whom it performed functions such as providing connections to the supernatural or creating an appropriately reverent atmosphere. Networks for the transmission of goods over long distances existed not just for reasons of maximising profit, but also because non-subsistence items were sufficiently important for rightful and proper behaviour that obtaining them warranted expenditure of money and effort.⁷² And as Shepard notes in his concluding remarks, possession of small quantities of movable goods which were believed to have exotic and distant origins (e.g. glass beads and cowrie shells) could reassure individuals and communities operating at barely above-subsistence levels that they had valuable protection against unknown future hazards. As Simon Yarrow argues in his chapter, we need constantly to bear in mind that the value regimes underpinning the movement of goods and the demand that fed those movements could be very different from those of the modern world. Even where interactions appear to our modern gaze to be economic in character, in the sense of being shaped by a profit motive, they may be only partly so, or not at all.

⁷⁰ Nicholas Purcell, 'Unnecessary Dependences', in Belich, Darwin *et al.*, *Prospect of Global History*, 102; B. Stross, 'Mesoamerican Copal Resins', *U Mut Maya*, vi (1997), 177-86.

⁷¹ Purcell, 'Unnecessary Dependences'.

⁷² *Contra* De Vries, 'Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World'.

People were, of course, as Shepard points out, as integral to networks as were goods, but their involvement was not only as merchants, brokers, sailors, or those others involved in supply chains and production. People themselves were often the ‘cargo’, whether as religious or administrative experts, skilled craft workers or, in the largest numbers, as slaves. Clearly the people in each of these categories moved along very different trajectories and met many different groups along the way. Slaves played a structural role to the extent that they tended to fill specific socio-economic niches, and their absence would have required reorganisation of the relevant social, economic and even political systems. It has been argued that the medieval European economy grew out of slave trading around the Mediterranean and across eastern Europe,⁷³ while the work of Zanj slaves in turning the marshes of Iraq to productive agriculture can be considered to have fuelled the urban Abbasid revolution of the eighth century.⁷⁴ Craftworkers, meanwhile, included the captured Tang soldiers who may have introduced papermaking to the Islamic world in the eighth century, mobile ironworkers in the African Great Lakes region (both noted by Shepard’s chapter), and the Persian artillery experts employed by the Mongols. Famously, of course, the Mongols also recruited and rewarded Uyghur, Kitan, Chinese and Persian administrators; Muslim traders; Chinese sailors

⁷³ Michael McCormick, *The Origins of the European Economy, Communications and Commerce, AD300-900* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. 741-77; arguments now being further developed in the light of numismatic and archaeological evidence by the ‘Dirhams for Slaves’ project led by Marek Jankowiak: <http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/dirhamsforslaves/index.php/en/> See also Jankowiak, ‘What can Trade in Saqaliba Slaves tell us about Early Islamic slavery?’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, xlix (2017), 169-72; with Felix Biermann (eds.) *Archaeology of Medieval Slavery* (forthcoming).

⁷⁴ The Zanj slaves are invisible in many ways, appearing only in Abbasid, not African, histories. They come into the light in the seventh century, at the start of a period of revolts that were most notable in the ninth century (for brief reference to those rebellions, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*, 3rd edn. (Abingdon and New York), 181-3). Our thanks to Stephanie Wynne-Jones for this example and information.

and shipbuilders; Korean generals; and European craftworkers.⁷⁵ The expertise and abilities that these people brought from their previous networks were used to create or reshape the receiving networks in ways that made a material difference to their worlds.

The well evidenced desire for those with skills or expertise highlights the widespread demand for knowledge. In this context, Shepard highlights the example of itinerant Irish trader-craftworkers, who also acted as healers, seers and teachers because of their possession of literary and religious knowledge. And as Dudbridge's essay indicates, one way for knowledge to move was through the circulation of books which could, for instance, be carried as gifts by monks (sometimes illegally), or be requested by rulers during the exchange of embassies.⁷⁶ The knowledge borne by expert travellers or contained in books had many potential uses: to create or reform administrative systems; to establish or revive religious practices; or to transmit or develop technologies in areas such as agriculture, papermaking, astronomy or military equipment. These were not trivial or ancillary matters.

Knowledge could and did come from anywhere, and accordingly required modes of transmission and entailed interpretation. Eurasianists who work primarily on texts often think of these processes of transmission in terms of the translation of written language. The Global

⁷⁵ Widely attested in sources in several languages, e.g. several encounters in William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, trans. Peter Jackson and D.O. Morgan (London, 1990).

⁷⁶ Brian Vivier, 'Chinese Foreign Trade, 960-1276' (Unpublished PhD diss. Yale University, 2008); Hilde De Weerd, 'What Did Su Che See in the North? Publishing Laws, State Security, and Political Culture in Song China', *T'oung Pao*, 3rd series, xcii (2006), 466-94.

Middle Ages has left us a huge range of extant examples, involving either translation into a second language or the co-existence of texts in parallel languages. We could think of:

Doctrinal and liturgical texts moving from Greek to Slavonic;

Buddhist sutras moving from Sanskrit into Chinese (as Glen Dudbridge outlines here);

Philosophical and scientific works from Greek, Persian and Sanskrit into Arabic, and later into Latin (and even back to Greek again);

Thirteenth-century bilingual surrender treaties struck between the Christian rulers and conquered populations of Islamic Spain;

Diplomatic communications such as the various letters to and from the Mongols;

Routine translation of government documents in empires like those of the Liao or Mongols;

Practical documents such as the multilingual agreements inscribed on the ninth-century Kollam Plates in five different scripts representing four different languages.⁷⁷

However, while the translation of written texts was one mode of transmission, we need, when thinking globally, to consider other modes for the circulation and transfer of ideas as well, whether these were conveyed orally, by means of pictograms, or by material culture. The need to take account of a multiplicity of modes of transmission, or perhaps more accurately, modes of communication, is most obviously something we should bear in mind for societies where our principal source base is archaeological, but it also matters for those regions of Eurasia and the Americas where written records were only one means of communicating and interpreting ideas. Indeed almost all of our chapters provide evidence for the *simultaneous* use of a variety of modes of communication in all world regions, one facet of what Dudbridge

⁷⁷ On the Kollam plates see above n.. 000.

describes as ‘networking behaviour’. And of course, as many of our chapters argue, the choice of location and the centrality of performative acts were indivisible elements of medieval communication.⁷⁸

While the acquisition or passage of objects of desire (and desired knowledge) might be one incentive for the existence of networks, the things, people and ideas that moved were distinct from networks themselves, which, as Shepard and Dudbridge show, comprised the *connections* between the political classes, religious practitioners, militaries, producers, traders and buyers, among others; connections that were made by the processes of movement and which could touch all members of societies, however remote and modest in social status.⁷⁹ But for these movements to happen, they required an infrastructure of travel routes and facilities, forms of transportation as well as frameworks for organising exchange and establishing trust over both short and long distances, whether in the shape of formal markets and institutions underwritten by state power or, as was more usual, the sorts of formalised informal practices, often connected to the preservation of reputation, described here in the chapters by Yarrow, Forrest and Haour, and Shepard. Indeed, if we also take into account the complex systems of production and supply that provided and supported the goods, people and ideas which circulated, and if we think about the structural demands that were met by those

⁷⁸ Oral, performative and spatial dimensions have been emphasised in recent studies of communication in medieval Europe, especially Latin Europe; see for instance, Marco Mostert and P. S. Barnwell (eds.), *Medieval Legal Process: Physical, Spoken and Written Performance in the Middle Ages*, (Turnhout, 2011). The study of communication in Europe is usually studied with very little reference to other medieval cultures (see, for instance, the European focus to the Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy series).

⁷⁹ See especially Shepard’s concluding remarks in this context.

movements, then we can see that the networks of connections observable in texts and archaeology implicated many more people than just those directly involved in transportation. When people participated in religious activities then they were touched by the networks that brought incense, books or holy people to their temple. If they paid (or were meant to pay) taxes, then they contributed to state expenditures that provided for the infrastructure and conduct of foreign relations that in turn enabled elites to benefit from and foster networks. By these sorts of indirect measurement, few people would have lived outside the range of one or more networks.

It will not be surprising that our emphasis on networks leads us frequently to a concern for praxis. Our papers explore some of the actions, behaviours, implicit knowledge, landscapes, performances and rituals by which the intangibles of authority and power, whether sacred or not, were made concrete in specific localities. The world of the Global Middle Ages as it emerges from our chapters was overwhelmingly one of people-to-people interactions that were mostly direct. Forrest and Haour discuss modes and significances of indirect and often long-distance communications that required, built, sustained and sometimes broke trust; but even this indirect contact was primarily represented in our sources by letters that were borne by individuals, usually for delivery in person (as noted by Standen and White). Transactions of all kinds – not just the economic variety – almost always took place in face-to-face exchanges. Take politics, for instance, where it is all too easy, particularly when thinking globally, to assume that polities were static worlds with courts fixed conceptually at the centre of the state, from where kings atop thrones sent out orders. Such a model encourages us to think in terms of decrees issued, laws promulgated and people summoned, with little to indicate how or why it was that such top-down actions achieved results. In this volume, however, De Weerd, Holmes and Watts explore how ‘high power’ of the sort often taken for

granted in the study of medieval polities was in fact created, sustained and challenged by continuous inter-personal relationships, in which mediators at many different social levels played vital roles. But this is not to suggest that medieval politics was simply a matter of material self-interest. Instead the striking point, as De Weerd, Holmes and Watts point out, is that mediation, together with communication and mobility, were integral to the creation and dissemination of the conceptual intangibles that legitimised and sustained the authority and power of socio-political elites. And, as Pennock and Power argue in their chapter which combines evidence from Mesoamerica and Latin Europe, ‘thinking globally’ was a striking conceptual intangible that could be instrumentalised in the creation and justification of high power. To apply these ideas to a different example, when Mongol *qans* gave out cloth-of-gold garments at their mobile court-camps, they drew upon resources, groups and systems that reached well beyond the empire. In their turn, the garments served to bind together the *qan* and his followers in trust, and that reflected and supported a cosmology that proposed the universal rulership of the *qan*, all of which had political and other consequences at the regional and local levels as well as in the governance of the Mongol empire.⁸⁰ As De Weerd, Holmes and Watts suggest, processes of mediation, communication and collaboration did not guarantee the successful creation of high power, but they did help. In the Mongol case, turning up at their court involved hard work, time and expense; that people did it at all is evidence that they thought it was worth it.

Consideration of praxis in turn helps us to think about scale. For, as several of our chapters reveal, the movements intrinsic to networks created connections across very different registers: local, mid-range, and global. Production, exchange and usage all occurred in localities that were defined by their immediate specificities: production possibilities were shaped by

⁸⁰ Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*, (Cambridge, 1997).

proximity to raw materials, craftworkers and transport infrastructure;⁸¹ exchange required negotiation of implicit understandings, creative misunderstandings, customs and languages; usage emerged from socio-cultural norms, practices and materialities.⁸² But some of these domestic elements could also provide links much further afield. Transportation routes led variously to nearby, distant and far-flung places. Languages created networks of their own, some of which, like Arabic, Latin, Nahuatl, Sanskrit/Pali, Sogdian, Swahili, written Chinese or Mesoamerican pictographic writing systems, could span large parts of continents, often thanks to a flexibility that arose from the combination of universal elements with regional specificity.⁸³ As Dudbridge's chapter indicates, local use could be greatly affected and indeed transformed by appropriations from afar. Conversely, usage even of imported things, people or ideas from distant places could also be swiftly domesticated, as in the case of Chinese porcelain ceramics that were set into mosque *mihrabs* and domestic dwellings on the Swahili coast, without reference to their original intended use, understanding of the allusions of their decorative programme, or awareness of the social implications of possessing such objects in their place of production.⁸⁴ Middle levels between global and local were provided by meeting places like ports and cities, annual gatherings, and periodic regional courts.⁸⁵ Movement

⁸¹ C.f. in the Chinese ceramics context, Anne Gerritsen, 'Fragments of a Global Past: Sites of Ceramics Manufacture in Song-Yuan-Ming Jiangxi.' *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient*, lii (2009), 117–52; Gerritsen, 'Scales of a Local: The Place of Locality in a Globalizing World', *Companion to World History*, pp.213-26.

⁸² See in this volume, Shepard and Haour/Forrest especially; potentially useful to medievalists are the 'Middle Ground' theses developed for a somewhat later context by Richard White, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, 1991); White, 'Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings', *The Mary and William Quarterly*, 3rd Series, lxiii (2006), 9-14.

⁸³ Our thanks to Caroline Dodds Pennock for this point.

⁸⁴ LaViolette, 'Swahili Cosmopolitanism'.

⁸⁵ On such meeting places see especially Shepard and Standen/White in this volume; see also Kenneth R. Hall, 'Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region of the Indian Ocean: c. 1300-1500', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, liii (2010), 109-45; on port cities in global history, see also Belich, Darwin, and Wickham, 'Introduction', *Prospect of Global History*, 19-21; for further reflections on port cities as the junction point between the global and local in the

through networks linked these different levels in complex ways, as we see in the case of Nikitin, discussed by Standen and White. As a Rus merchant, Nikitin bore credentials that were intended to assist him among co-religionists and in other political jurisdictions, but the latter failed at the local level while Nikitin was still on a routine itinerary, then co-religionists became increasingly scarce as he moved ever further beyond the bounds of his native religious network. His route home took him through numerous middle-range nodes in the global transport network, and at times he despaired at finding himself at the intersection of a regime of customs duties, exemptions, and piracy, all of which had local, regional, and at least in the case of pirates, global dimensions. Dudbridge's discussion of the 'Book Road' that linked different parts of northeast Asia in the seventh to ninth centuries also illustrates the relationships between the skills that travellers, such as the Korean monk Hye-ch'o, needed if they were to navigate the challenges presented by local seas, regional government, local investors in transoceanic ventures (who often included those same regional governors), Chinese tax regimes, kickbacks to various middlemen, small-scale private trade in gold, travel by co-religionists for purposes of exchange, knowledge and fundraising, cultural transfers ranging across many fields from poetry to law, and even the monetisation of the Japanese economy. It is in the intricacies of specific stories such as those of Nikitin and Hye-ch'o – at the same time profoundly localised but also inextricably connected into larger frameworks – that we see the contours, implications, and possibilities of a Global Middle Ages.

And there is, indeed, an important element of story to the Global Middle Ages. As Whittow points out, the medieval evidence that survives has been shaped not only by exigencies of

centuries after 1400 see Markus Vink, 'The Afrasian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Urban Networks in the Indian Ocean World', Review Article, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, liv (2011), 405-16. On 'glocalization', Roland Robertson, 'Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity' in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities* (London, 1995), 25-44.

recording mode and medium and unforeseen events, but also by human agency, which could include destruction and always involved selection. As we all know, our sources – helped along by modern historians – build narratives whether overtly or subtly, and several of our papers help us towards an understanding of how the people of the Global Middle Ages told stories to make sense of their worlds and articulate their ambitions. As Pennock and Power show, Aztec cosmological narratives asserted claims to global authority that could be highly effective in the Mesoamerican world but did not survive the assault of Spanish weapons and microbes, which were themselves underpinned by a narrative of godly support for ruthless acquisition. In their chapter on settlements, Lesyer, Standen and Wynne-Jones highlight diverse stories about the creation of urban places that were specific to certain times as well as locations, though apparently increasingly prominent from the eleventh century onwards. The ‘Shirazi myth’ provided exotic origins for the emerging towns of the Swahili Coast; the ‘classic Chinese city’ was presented in standardised historical formats that correspond neither to the new southern cities of the Song Chinese economic revolution nor to the complexities and variety of steppe residences whether permanent or temporary; meanwhile Dudo of St Quentin made claims with respect to Rouen that differentiated a civilised Norman present from a barbarian past. Such narratives were, of course, not merely comforts or retrospective validations, but helped to define the present worlds of their writers and audiences while also seeking impact beyond them. And, as Dudbridge makes clear, narratives of religions also emerged from within individual faiths, but then frequently extended across political, linguistic, cultural and social boundaries. The result was that these stories helped to form Buddhist connections between north-east, east, south and south-east Asia, and Islamic links between central and western Asia; north, east and west Africa; and southern Europe, even as each narrative at the same time also delimited a specific world. Further along this spectrum, stories about trust and value were implicated to varying extents with practices that created, sustained,

and sometimes ended, relationships. In Forrest and Haour's chapter, we see how accounts presenting information about unfamiliar places were often validated by reference to the trustworthiness of the informant; and in their paper and in Yarrow's, how it was that the reputations necessary for success in commerce or politics were made, guarded, and lost through narrative presentations of individual or group behaviour. Narrative is, unsurprisingly, a global phenomenon; and we see here both the huge diversity of forms it took, and the ways in which different stories shaped not only the sources that have come down to us, but also the multiple, overlapping worlds in which the people of the Global Middle Ages lived.

5. The Global Middle Ages as working hypothesis: diversification, options and experiments

In as much as we have existing working models of the Global Middle Ages, one of the most powerful is that provided by R.I. Moore, a founding member of the 'Defining the Global Middle Ages' project. For Moore, the Global Middle Ages was a time of 'Great Intensification' across Eurasia: a period characterised by increased economic activity, urbanisation, social restructuring, multi-centred politics and new frameworks of ideas. This time of internal intensification generated a range of different responses, particularly at the level of social, religious and political organisation; this in turn amounted to a 'Great Diversification' in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries; that in turn laid the foundations for the 'Great Divergence' of modern times.⁸⁶ Although Moore has confined his analysis largely to Eurasia, rather similar features have also been identified in the same period for Islamic Africa and the Pacific, and more cautiously in the sometimes dramatic, but also sometimes hard-to-interpret, evidence for urbanisation, political multiplicity and changes in social stratification in regions as various as the Swahili Coast region, southern Africa, the Mississippi valley, and

⁸⁶ For Moore's case see the bibliography in note 000 above.

Mesoamerica.⁸⁷ For Moore, intensification and diversification are not explicable in terms of inter-regional human contact, a somewhat similar point made by others. Victor Liebermann, for instance, has stressed that comparable developments in political and cultural formations across Eurasia before 1250, and parallels in the collapse of such polities during the late medieval period, are not to be explained principally in terms of contact or transmission. For Liebermann, as well as for Bruce Campbell in his recent evocation of a late medieval ‘Great Transition’, it is climatic change which was the main motor behind comparable shifts in global experience rather than human connections and networks.⁸⁸

These evocations of Great Intensifications, Diversifications and Transitions raise important questions: if we can indeed observe such major long-term shifts, how did they come about, and why did they end? We cannot hope on the basis of the evidence and interpretation offered in our chapters to address such questions directly or fully, but we can offer a working hypothesis. We are happy to acknowledge that human contact may not have been directly responsible for the transformations of the centuries around the first millennium C.E. identified by Moore, or indeed for any other shift or transition across a ‘middle millennium’; but we do see connections, of many kinds, forged by humans as the key to characterising what was distinctive about the Global Middle Ages.⁸⁹ If we can detect diversification in the eleventh- to thirteenth-centuries, then we would see it as a generative force created by the normalisation of longer, denser and more frequent connections, leading to patterns and levels of integration

⁸⁷ Coatsworth, Cole *et al.*, *Global Connections, Politics ...To 1500*, particularly chs. 9 to 11.

⁸⁸ See above 000.

⁸⁹ In that sense, we agree with the editors of the medieval volume of the *Cambridge World History* that connections should be the focus of historians of the Global Middle Ages, although this is a recommended focus of that volume which the chapters pick up only intermittently.

that long predate the European voyages of discovery.⁹⁰ More connections implied increasing interactions between many different peoples, ideas and things (Shepard's three registers), increases which occurred throughout the Global Middle Ages at different times in different places. The consequence of more interactions was a great expansion in the range of options available to many people at many different social levels. We argue that this diversification of choice allowed for experimentation in every arena not just in Eurasia but everywhere: a truly global phenomenon. That is to say, for us, the end of the ancient empires, whether we think they came with a bang or a whimper, was accompanied by such an intensification of connections that, as we have seen above, objects, people and ideas from distant places became integral to the worlds of receivers across an array of social classes, with effects that spanned continents and reached down to the smallest villages.

The idea of experimentation emphasises the role of human agency in generating historical circumstances. And here we should think not just of the actions and influence of extraordinary figures like Muhammad, Chinggis *qan*, Kumarajiva, Charlemagne, or Cyril and Methodius, or even the princess who supposedly smuggled silkworms to Byzantium or the Chinese soldiers who may have brought paper to the Muslim world; but also of far less high profile, but far more ubiquitous, examples: the unobserved choices of everyday religious practices, the unrecorded negotiations of social status, and the difficult-to-discern rationales for choosing one method of recording or communication over another. Sometimes people liked the results of their experiments and kept doing them, but other times they stopped or did something else. Many experiments of the medieval period did not survive into the modern world, but were of great significance in their own time. By focusing on the historical present of people making choices, we can treat experiments not as acts that can be dismissed as false starts or as merely

⁹⁰ For different levels of connection, from contact to integration see Belich, Darwin and Wickham, 'Introduction', *Prospect of Global History*, 17.

the seeds of later developments, but as the fabric of life itself in the Global Middle Ages; experiments which offered contemporaries a immense range of different possible futures in every conceivable arena of life.

We can begin to substantiate this ‘experiment’ hypothesis by looking at religion. A radically new phenomenon that characterises the earlier part of the Global Middle Ages was the spread of universal religions across large areas of Africa and Eurasia. This in turn led to an unprecedented variety of faith options that were created and sustained by networks of missionaries, translators, pilgrims and institutions.⁹¹ A well known regional example is southeast Asia, where early rulers across the region borrowed Hindu concepts, to which they conjoined Buddhist, largely Mahayana, ideas, notably in the Khmer Empire and Srivijaya (Map 5).⁹² In the thirteenth century, Burmese monks introduced Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka, presenting an option taken by rulers and commoners alike, first in Burma, then at Angkor and Sukhotai. Meanwhile in island Southeast Asia, Islam was an option also taken by both commoners and rulers, except on Bali, where the population remained Hindu. In the long view this may appear as just a succession of changes, but at the time the rich options available allowed for experimentation. Khmer rulers variously claimed to be Shiva or Vishnu, or Buddhist bodhisattvas; Burmese kings became Buddhist but were still regarded as manifestations of Shiva.⁹³ Presented with such options in contexts that did not demand a

⁹¹ In a Byzantine context the classic study remains Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe 500-1453* (London, 1971); for the Islamic world see Eaton, ‘Islamic History as Global History’, esp. 22-33; André Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (Leiden, 2002); A. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation. Comparative Perspectives from History* (Edinburgh, 2017) offers a series of regional studies, the majority medieval; Tansen Sen, ‘The Spread of Buddhism’, *CWH*, V, 447-79; see also Dudbridge and Strathern in this vol.

⁹² See Dudbridge in this vol. 000 below.

⁹³ J. G. De Casparis and Ian Mabbett, ‘Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia before c. 1500’, in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 1993), 276-340)

singular selection, there was often no apparently compelling reason or great advantage in choosing just one over the others.

As religion diversified, the ancient empires also fell apart into persistently multi-state systems shaped by change, conflict and diplomacy.⁹⁴ While some serious imperial claims were quite quickly asserted, or reasserted, from the sixth and seventh centuries, most notably by the Islamic caliphate but also by the Byzantines and by the Tang in East Asia, we may question how effective such empires always were underneath their rhetoric, even when at their most powerful. The early Tang dynasty, for instance, frequently struggled to obtain an accurate count of the population, and even before the catastrophic rebellions of the mid-eighth century the court had devolved control of strategic regions to generals with plenipotentiary powers. The Tang, like the Byzantines, interacted frequently with many other rulers and leaders, often on an equal or near-equal basis notwithstanding their rhetoric of superiority or universal power.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, impressive remains as at Cahokia in Mississippi from about 500 (Map 2), or patchy sources as for Aksum in Ethiopia down to the seventh century (Map 7), suggest the existence of other major powers as well; they too were part of wider systems of interaction between multiple polities.⁹⁶ Every ruler or leader offered alternative futures to followers real

⁹⁴ Processes examined in late Roman, Persian and early Islamic contexts by Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993).

⁹⁵ Denis Twitchett, *Financial administration under the T'ang dynasty*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1970), 12-16; Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power and Connections, 580-80* (Oxford, 2012). For the frequent gap between universalist rhetoric and quotidian reality in Byzantine diplomacy see Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁹⁶ On Aksum and its wider connections David Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC- 1300 AD* (Woodbridge, 2012); Judith McKenzie et al., *The Garima Gospels Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia*

or potential, with options shaped by material or spiritual incentives, formal restrictions and prevailing values, and different levels of ambition. Every interaction provided opportunities; and with more polities - and, of course, more political mediation of the sort described by De Weerdt, Holmes and Watts - came denser networks of contact.

Turning to communication, we would suggest that in the period after the fall of the ancient empires people were making choices that resulted in a shift – uneven and at different speeds in different places – from the tenuous, spindly connections of earlier times to cross-border, multi-centred networks that became denser, and institutionalised.⁹⁷ Routes branched and multiplied, and overlapped with those – of at least equal importance – that carried religion, culture, technology and political envoys. The art and archaeology of the Tarim oases show that the fourth to seventh centuries saw a huge increase in traffic along the Silk Roads.⁹⁸ Srivijaya, established in Sumatra in the seventh century, became powerful because of its control of maritime routes in southeast Asia (Map 5).⁹⁹ In many places there were more customs officials, more formalisation of borders, more offices to deal with foreigners, more

(Oxford: Manar al-Athar, 2016). For Cahokia, see Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt, *Medieval Mississippians: the Cahokian World* (Santa Fe, 2015); Pauketat, Alt and Jeffery Kruchten, ‘City of Earth and Wood. New Cahokia and its Material-Historical Implications’, in Norman Yoffee (ed.), *CWH, III, Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE- 1200 CE*, 437-54; see also references to both in Whittow below.

⁹⁷ On early medieval spindly connections see S. Sindbæk, ‘The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, x1 (2007), 59-74.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road. Art and History* (London, 2003).

⁹⁹ O.W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce. A Study of the Origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca, NY, 1967), esp. 13-22; George Coedes and Louis-Charles Damais, *Sriwijaya: History, Religion and Language of an Early Malay Polity* (Kuala Lumpur, 1992).

multilingual contracts, and so on.¹⁰⁰ With more people travelling, there was more cross-cultural interaction, with the continual creation of new mixtures. This had occurred in ancient times too, when those Silk Road magpies, the Kushans, melded cultural elements from the regions they ruled.¹⁰¹ But in the Global Middle Ages, cross-cultural interaction was both more intensive and extensive. Thus, the Sasanians began to borrow ancient Assyrian styles in the third century. By the seventh century they were passing these styles on to the Tang. Recent research indicates that the Sasanian pearl roundel was to be found in regions from the Pacific to the Mediterranean, far beyond Sasanian political control.¹⁰²

6. Conclusion: did the Global Middle Ages end?

As we stated out the outset to this chapter, we think it premature to settle for an overall narrative or a unified timeline for the Global Middle Ages. But we would argue that increased connectivity had generated diversification somewhere in most world regions by at least the latter part of the Global Middle Ages, and it was diversity that offered options with which people could experiment. There were more religions, especially if we count the intra-religious factions and the sorts of syncretisms visible among Shepard's Silks Roads communities; there were many more polities, of more different types, and they changed much more frequently than the ancient empires had; there was more intense communication for more reasons along more routes. This was a time, globally, when important issues were up for grabs while

¹⁰⁰ The Silk Roads are perhaps the *locus classicus* for evidence on this score, drawing upon the cornucopia of documentation discovered at Dunhuang (see above 000).

¹⁰¹ Tucker, 'The Kushans', in his *The Silk Road*, 32-63; also several chapters in B.A. Litvinsky, Zhang Guangda and R. Shabani Samghabadi (eds.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vol. III: The Crossroads of Civilizations, AD 250 to 750* (Paris, 1996).

¹⁰² Elsie Holmes Peck, 'The Representation of Costumes in the Reliefs of Taq-i-Bustan', *Artibus Asiae*, xxxi, 2/3 (1969), 101-46; Matteo Compareti, 'The Role of the Sogdian Colonies in the Diffusion of the Pearl Roundels Pattern', in Compareti and Scarcia Raffetta (eds.), *Ērān ud Anērān: Studies presented to Boris Ilich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (Electronic Version, 2003, updated 2006, <http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/compareti.html>, viewed 28 September 2017)

different solutions multiplied. What were the most important social values: were they chivalry, generosity, loyalty, merit-making, orthodoxy, sexual continence? How were relations between different peoples to be managed; what role was there for diplomacy and warfare, but also for devices such as fictive kinship, marriages, payments, and treaties? How were relations between men, women and others to be framed and conducted? What were the 'best' ways to exploit the general populace? Different and numerous forms of taxation abounded, as did ideas about who paid, who collected and where the dues went. What were the limits on the behaviour of rulers and how could they be enforced? What were the uses of but also limits on slavery? The Global Middle Ages offered more options than before, and experimentation abounded.

But when did this change? In 1492 a Genoese seafarer re-established the spindliest of connections between Eurasia and the Americas, starting an experiment that from a European perspective took rather well, even if many around the world, especially Native Americans and African Americans, would have seen it, and continue to see it, differently. One reason, of course, for the 'success' of that re-engagement was that Europeans crossing the Atlantic were able to lock into pre-existing worlds of connections within the Americas, many of which had been thickening across the Global Middle Ages.¹⁰³ The same was true of the Indian Ocean world within which the Portuguese and Ottomans were operating by the start of the sixteenth century, expansionary initiatives which perhaps had been prefigured by the Ming voyages of 1405-1433.¹⁰⁴ But strikingly, even paradoxically, the thickening of communications began to

¹⁰³ Michael E. Smith, 'Trading Patterns. Ancient American', in William H. Neill (ed.), *Berkshire Encyclopaedia of World History* (Great Barrington, MA, 2010), 2533-38 provides a useful starting point.

¹⁰⁴ On the Ottomans, see G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford, 2010); Edward L. Dreyer, Zheng He: *China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (London, 2007); Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2005).

mean a narrowing of choices, as Shepard observes in his chapter on the land and maritime Silk Roads:

Religion now carried a political charge, a rationale for trafficking or domination with repercussions for broader forms of culture. The Portuguese were not alone in hardening religious divides or applying coercion. Muscovite and Ottoman rulers based universalist claims on 'orthodoxy' ... By 1600 the quantity of things and persons involved in intercontinental trading was unprecedented. But the casual intermingling and cultural symbiosis long seen along the Silk Roads abated.

Looking further ahead, the mobility that had enabled options and diversity eventually became mass migrations, including the Atlantic slave trade and settler colonialism. Although some willingly embraced the options comprising modernity, by the nineteenth century for the most part European imperialism imposed options originating in one small part of the world on the astonishing variety of the rest, who were no longer experimenters in their own right but experimented upon.¹⁰⁵

One result of these changes from the Global Middle Ages to something else was the invention of 'culture'. The imposition of dominance in almost every arena fostered and was fostered by the 'othering' of hitherto everyday activities. Such activities were ascribed to coherent – if artificial – wholes that were labelled as 'cultures'; sometimes - somewhat more generously but usually with reference to a vanished (and largely imagined) past - they might be termed 'civilisations'. Seen in this light, the early modern period becomes at least partly about the

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, Sebastian Conrad, 'Double Marginalization. A Plea for a Transnational Perspective on German History,' in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History* (New York, 2009), CHECK.

struggle to retain older creative practices in the face of attempts to compel the wholesale adoption of new, externally-imposed systems. This was not straightforwardly a ‘west versus the rest’ dynamic consequent upon 1492 alone, as Shepard’s observations about sixteenth-century Muscovite and Ottoman rulers’ claims and actions make clear. In a similar way while we might identify a very early case of the wholesale imposition of a ‘system’ in Spanish attempts to Christianise surviving Aztecs, we should also think about rather earlier efforts on the part of Song literati to stamp out ‘folk’ or ‘shamanic’ medical practices and pharmacopoeia and replace them with state-approved versions.¹⁰⁶ And we should remember that the erosion of options was never universal or uni-directional. Some groups may be observed as late as the nineteenth century still trying to borrow creatively, and sometimes succeeding in forging their own path.¹⁰⁷ If the Global Middle Ages amounted to an ‘Age of Experiment’, change away from that world was slow, and there was no clear or singular trajectory towards ‘modernity’, if indeed that end point has ever been anything more than a deceptive imaginary.

The Global Middle Ages makes sense in two important ways: first, as a period with distinct characteristics within fluid boundaries determined by theme and location; and second, as method. The Global Middle Ages presented in this volume was characterised by networks, mobility, mediation, interaction, and by human agency at all social levels. It was a period of options and experiments. The way we study the Global Middle Ages needs to be just as

¹⁰⁶ T. J. Hinrichs, *Shamans, Witchcraft, and Quarantine: The Medical Transformation of Governance and Southern Customs in Mid-Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming).

¹⁰⁷ E.g. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped. A History of a Geo-Body* (Honolulu, 1994); Shirley Ye, ‘Business, Water, and the Global City: Germany, Europe, and China, 1820-1950’ (PhD diss, Harvard University, 2013).

experimental and open-ended. The topic is a moving target, and studying it has to involve a continual process of defining and redefining its scope and limits. If we are to study an 'Age of Experimentation' on a truly global scale we must draw freely upon any knowledge and skills that help, regardless of discipline. This means open-minded and enthusiastic collaboration. Above all, we must see the period in its own terms, and not simply as an explanation for what came next. In the 'Age of Experimentation', as in the present, there is an amazing world out there. Let's get to work.