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# **“Europe” in the Middle Ages**

**Klaus Oschema**

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

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For a medievalist who lives and works in the early twenty-first century, writing about Europe is a highly ambivalent undertaking. Some readers might be tempted to argue that the topic hardly merits our attention, since they consider the medieval evidence too sparse or too inconclusive. Others might think that the choice of subject constitutes *per se* an unwelcome relapse into Eurocentric tendencies. In any case, it seems clear that the subject inevitably evokes current political debates. Whether one subscribes to the conviction that Europe merits becoming the framework for an increasingly interconnected and profound political and cultural community or, to the contrary, clings to the, historically speaking, relatively new belief that people are best organized in the form of nation-states, talking about Europe has political overtones.

Having studied the use of the notion of Europe for quite some time now, I am very conscious about these effects. It might thus be helpful to clarify my own position: Born and raised in late twentieth-century Germany, I was seventeen years old when the Berlin wall fell. I grew up to be deeply convinced that the European Union (EU) constitutes a vital means of overcoming the numerous problems that the nation-state entails—and I still stand by these convictions. As an historian, however, I am also convinced that political questions and problems cannot be solved by looking backwards: history does not furnish ready-made answers. What it can do, is provide alternative perspectives and information that

helps us to better understand our problems in the first place. What we choose to do remains our own responsibility.

In this sense, I would like to stress that the material and the interpretations I present in this little book should neither be read as an affirmation of current EU-policies—nor as their rejection. My work as an historian focuses on analyzing and understanding how people used the notion of Europe in the medieval past and which ideas they connected with that term. I can see no convincing argument that would force us to accept that the phenomena we can see here determine or justify any specific modern interpretation of “Europe”.

That said, I would like to thank the staff at Arc Humanities Press for inviting me to write this short book, which largely relies on a (far too voluminous) study I published in German exactly a decade ago. I am indebted to Simon Forde for his detailed feedback on the original manuscript—and particularly to Angela Roberts (Manchester) for her invaluable work on the “denglish” first version. Whenever anything sounds like idiomatic English, it’s thanks to her efforts and those of my wonderful colleague and long-time friend Chris Jones (Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand). I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer for helping me to eliminate a number of shortcomings. My wife Monica Corrado also read the text and pointed out several problems—but she obviously deserves my gratitude for much more than that. Finally, my thanks go out to Patrick Geary, who taught me more than he’ll probably realize.

## Chapter I

# Why Europe? A Concept Crossing History and Politics

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The title of this short monograph merits explanation. Although the name “Europe” has enjoyed immense popularity in medieval studies from the mid-twentieth century onwards, it is by no means obvious what an analysis of “‘Europe’ in the Middle Ages” might comprise. What’s more, the use of the term in medieval studies is far from obvious, as we shall see. On the most general level, recent publications on “Europe in the Middle Ages” can be divided into two categories: the majority seek to describe events and developments that took place in the geographical unit that we now identify as “Europe.” Sometimes they analyze and identify the formation of what is often called a “European culture”<sup>1</sup> or even a “European identity.”

Another series of studies, smaller in number, focuses on the development of the concept (or the idea) of Europe. They do not so much ask “What happened in Europe during the Middle Ages?” or “What were the characteristics of medieval societies in Europe?,” but instead focus on whether the *notion*

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I See Bartlett, *Making of Europe*. For the sake of brevity and due to the introductory character of this short book, I will limit the references as far as possible. The contributions that can be found in the bibliography will be quoted with short titles. Direct quotations from sources that are given without references can conveniently be identified online (OA) in Oschema, *Bilder von Europa* (see bibliography; references will be given with the abbreviation *BE*, followed by the page number).

(or a *concept*) of Europe played a role during the period we call the Middle Ages and how this role can be described.

It is the historians' role to probe sources for answers—but the questions they choose to ask are inevitably informed by the present day. Many authors have searched for the “roots” of the idea of European political unity in the Middle Ages, but the first historians to do so, from the late 1940s onwards, were somewhat disappointed by what they found. Around 1990, when the fall of the Berlin Wall sparked renewed interest in all questions concerning the history and identity of “Europe,” medievalists began synthesizing the findings of these pioneering works. They asserted that the word “Europe” was used quite rarely in the medieval period and that it remained a “purely geographical” notion for most of the time between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

In the following pages I will argue that both assumptions are distorted, if not wrong. In order to make a convincing case for the modification of this well-established picture, I would have to present the available sources in much more detail than is possible in this book. To compensate for this unavoidable constraint, I direct interested readers to my longer monograph on the subject (*Bilder von Europa im Mittelalter*).

My initial remarks will have made clear that “Why Europe?” is an important question. While the subject is not an obvious one from a medievalist's perspective, the question can be answered in several ways. Based on what was, until quite recently, the mainstream of medieval research, one might argue that given the (alleged) scarcity and insignificance of the notion of Europe in medieval sources it is no subject at all. However, the question is also important for our own present, not least because we have learned about the perilous effects of Eurocentrism and the need to globalize perspectives if we want to create an adequate picture of the world we inhabit. In 2002, when Michael Mitterauer asked *Why Europe?*, he justified his endeavour by attempting to establish the medie-

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<sup>2</sup> For a well-informed and concise overview from this period see Hiestand, “‘Europa’ im Mittelalter”.

val roots of European hegemony in the modern period. His approach relied on the assumption that some specific features of European culture and environment laid the groundwork for developments that led to a kind of globalization of Europe.

Such an approach raises questions that must be analyzed, especially since the underlying master narrative of the "Europeanization of the World" has been shown to be highly problematic. My aim here is more limited. I believe that many of the discussions about the "nature" or the "essence" of Europe that still linger in scholarly discourse (and also in political debates, for instance in the media) are relatively impressionistic and based on highly subjective interpretations and ideas. It is hard to gauge whether the widespread Christianization of the part of world we call Europe made this particular religious feature a permanent part of "European identity," or whether it constitutes a contingent (and currently precarious) historical development. If the latter, does it make any sense to continue speaking of "Christian Europe" today? Analogous arguments could be made for other cultural features, such as the importance of cities and urban culture, the development of chivalry and knighthood, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of engaging with questions concerning the "Europeanness" of individual cultural traits and their historical development, I propose to merely trace the use of the word: Where and when did premodern authors employ the notion of "Europe"? What did they mean by it? Which further ideas and connotations became attached to it?

This book will not try to explain what Europe "really is" by looking either at earlier uses of the word or at phenomena that occurred in the space we identify as "Europe" today.

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**3** For a list of features that characterized medieval "European" culture, see Heimpel, "Europa." Agnes Heller, "Europe: An Epilogue?," in *The Idea of Europe. Problems of National and Transnational Identity*, ed. Brian Nelson, David Roberts, and Walter Veit (Oxford: Berg, 1992), 12–25 at 14, plainly states "there is no European culture," declaring the respective models to be constructed in retrospect.

Instead, it will discuss a genuinely historical question by following the uses of the word through the period we call the “Middle Ages.”

## **Contemporary Expectations and the Quest for Historical Roots**

These introductory remarks show that the analysis of ideas and “images” (in the loose sense of both physical and mental representations) of Europe in the Middle Ages is not self-evident. Until the mid-twentieth century, most historians of the Middle Ages were not particularly interested in Europe as a category of analysis. They rather searched for the roots of their own nation in the period that followed the so-called fall of the Roman Empire (what historians now prefer to describe as the “transformation of the Roman world”).<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, medieval history occupied an important role, mostly due to its political relevance in the endeavour to legitimize the modern nation-states by means of their history. Authors who referred to Europe when they reflected on medieval history were mostly philosophers: Friedrich Schlegel, for example, presented Charlemagne as a foundational figure in a “new Europe” (BE 38). Historians, on the other hand, mostly presented this Frankish king and Roman emperor in terms of national belonging. In this respect, the German historian Leopold von Ranke seems an exception at first glance, but a closer look reveals that his use of “Europe” mostly follows modern geographic conventions. Whenever his analyses developed more “universal” perspectives, he preferred to distinguish between “occidental” and “oriental” characteristics (BE 39–40).

After the experiences of the two World Wars, historians were equally influenced by the needs and discourse of their own time when searching for “Europe in the Middle Ages.” In doing so, however, they rarely made their political inspiration

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<sup>4</sup> For nineteenth-century approaches, see Geary, *The Myth of Nations*; for the “transformation” see the series “The Transformation of the Roman World” (since 2008: “Brill’s Series on the Early Middle Ages”).

explicit. It remains noticeable that the first studies to scrutinize the origins of an “occidental” sense of belonging, as well as the relationship between Christianity and Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, appeared only a few years after the end of the First World War (BE 42–43: Richard Wallach, 1928; Werner Fritzemeyer, 1931). One of the first medievalists to explicitly emphasize the notion of Europe as a meaningful cultural unit with long-standing effects, was Christopher Dawson, an English Catholic, who identified the Carolingian Empire as the nucleus of what he called the “true Europe.” Dawson’s *Making of Europe* was soon translated into German—and the fact that his German publisher replaced the continent’s name in the title with “Occident” (*Abendland*) expresses how marginal “Europe” was perceived to be in the discussion of medieval subjects.<sup>5</sup>

This changed profoundly after the Second World War—or more precisely, during the war’s last years: by 1942, representatives of the Allies had already started planning the publication of a new history of Europe. This collective work was meant to provide an “objective” history that would establish the enduring development of a European culture. *The European Inheritance* was finally published in three volumes in 1954 (after a series of problems, due to the growing tensions between the Allies),<sup>6</sup> and its obvious goal was to accentuate a shared European culture after the trauma of conflict. This

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<sup>5</sup> Dawson, *Making of Europe*; cf. Brigitte Leucht, “Christopher Dawson (1889–1970),” in *Europa-Historiker*, 2:211–29. W. H. Roobol, “Europe in the Historiography between the World Wars,” in *Europe from a Cultural Perspective. Historiography and Perceptions*, ed. Albert Rijksbaron, W. H. Roobol, and M. Weisglas (The Hague: Nijgh en Van Ditmar, 1987), 52–61 at 58–60, demonstrates that historians of the modern period integrated the notion earlier than medievalists.

<sup>6</sup> *The European Inheritance*, ed. Ernest Barker, George Clarke, and Paul Vaucher, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 1:v; cf. Stuart Woolf, “Europa und seine Historiker,” in *Probleme und Perspektiven der Europa-Historiographie*, ed. Hannes Siegrist and Rolf Petri, *Comparativ* 14/3 (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2004), 50–71 at 55–56.

approach was not exceptional: the last years of the war (and those that immediately followed) witnessed the publication of an impressive series of pertinent studies by Federico Chabod and Carlo Curcio in Italy; Heinz Gollwitzer, Hermann Heimpel, and Jürgen Fischer in Germany; Oskar Halecki (a Pole who lived in exile in the United States); Bernard Voyenne and Lucien Febvre in France; and Denys Hay in Scotland. Much of their work focused on the notion and the idea of Europe in the Middle Ages and/or the early modern period. Together, these pioneering studies furnished the basis for later research.

Soon after the war, the notion of Europe, sometimes also the “Occident,” became a concept that allowed historians to overcome categories which had been discredited (e.g., the “nation,” especially from a German perspective) but simultaneously connected them to the political discourse. Reconstruction after the Second World War soon unfolded under “European” auspices: in 1950, the famous “Karlspreis” (Charlemagne Prize) was awarded for the first time (to Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, the founder of the Paneuropean Union). With this prize, the German city of Aachen proposed to decorate individuals (and later also institutions) that had furthered the peaceful integration of Western Europe, thereby successfully claiming the notion of Europe for the Western, non-communist parts of the continent. At the same time, several “European” organizations that focused on economic and infrastructural questions were established, in order to ensure concrete political cooperation. After the formation of the Council of Europe (1949), the six nations of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg created the European Community for Coal and Steel (1952) and soon deepened their cooperation with the European Economic Community and Euratom (1958; the Treaties of Rome were signed in 1957).<sup>7</sup>

In this situation, working on Europe gave medievalists a way to make a meaningful contribution to ongoing debates and developments, while also enabling the replacement

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**7** For a short overview, see e.g., Ulrich Brasche, *Europäische Integration*, 4th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).