Book Reviews

Matthew Gabrielle and David M. Perry. *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe.* New York: HarperCollins, 2021. Pp. 307. Hardcover $29.99.

Matthew Gabrielle, Professor of Medieval Studies at Virginia Tech, and David M. Perry, a senior academic advisor in the History Department at the University of Minnesota, question what was actually dark about the Dark Ages. Their exploration ranges from the Eastern Italian coast (Ravenna) in 430 CE to 1321 in the same city where Dante Alighieri finished the *The Divine Comedy*. They take us on a journey through seventeen chapters of reimagining how the early Middle Ages should be discussed and show that this era was full of world-altering events that made it the Bright Ages.

Before the introduction, the authors provide a map of Western Europe that has each city numbered one to sixteen to coincide with a distinct topic explored. In each chapter they reference artwork to better paint a picture of the Middle Ages. The book also includes eight pages of color images depicting coins, paintings, tapestries, stone art, stain glass, and cathedrals that are all described throughout the chapters. The use of artwork is paramount to the argument. At the same time, this book was not written for an academic audience but instead for casual readers. The authors do not use footnotes but instead include a section with suggestions for further reading. The source material includes Christian-based records but also uses Islamic, Viking, and Jewish documents with a broad geographic scope ranging from Western Europe to the Levant (modern-day Syria and Palestine), Russia and North Africa. Too often, people think the Middle Ages was primarily marked by religiosity, but Gabrielle and Perry argue that it was diverse and multi-ethnic.

The authors are on a crusade to change the perception of the Middle Ages, and they succeed. The first chapter lends credit to Galla Placidia for starting the Middle Ages, as she was in command of the Western Roman Empire in 423 CE until her son

Valentinian turned eighteen in 437 CE. After her death in 450 CE, popular interpretations claim that Rome fell, but as these authors point out, this analysis is not accurate. While Western Rome may have been lost, Byzantine stood strong. This is emphasized further by how the Byzantines called themselves Romans. In another chapter, the authors show the Vikings in a new light, not just brutes who plundered Europe. They elaborate on how the term Vikings is a blanket term with limited meaning. The Vikings interacted with many people from Europe, Africa, Asia, and even North America. Next, the authors frame The First Crusade as an intersection of biblical prophecy and history, contextualizing the Franks' self-image as God's chosen people as their justification to kill those they deemed heretics. In the middle of the book, they talk about Iberia (Spain) as a place where the three religions coexisted with each other until the crusades. The authors also include Maimonides, a great Muslim philosopher, whose work is still studied to this day. His contribution to the Middle Ages was pushing the narrative of using logic and reason when thinking about god.

Ultimately, *The Bright Ages* is a solid casual and historiographical reading. Each chapter leaves the reader wanting to know more. It dispels popular notions about the Dark Ages and correctly renames it the Bright Ages. Medieval history is often cast in a negative light, but it has relevance in modernity. The word crusade is thrown around by US politicians and news outlets casually, texts about philosophy and theology are still read, and stories about the Dark Ages are adapted into film. People in modern times have kept the Middle Ages relevant, and Gabrielle and Perry's book is a novel vehicle to reference it correctly.

Dominic Sheehan