The Medieval Internet

Praise for The Medieval Internet

"Jakob Linaa Jensen provides a timely reminder that there's nothing like a detour through history to dispel the facile promise that the Internet will empower the people and revitalize democracy. The Medieval Internet is a sweeping and provocative account of the affinities between our datafied, "post-industrial" era and the brutality of feudal-era exploitation. However, his nuanced approach to the Medieval Era also unearths resources for hope -- but not without a struggle. This is a fascinating and invaluable book that sheds new light on our current predicament."

Mark Andrejevic,
Monash University

"This most important book concerns nothing less than whether or not our best norms and practices of democracy, liberal humanism, and rights of individual freedom and privacy can survive in the face of authoritarian threats. These are not just in the obvious forms of political repression and physical violence; as Jakob Linaa Jensen demonstrates in several key ways, the threats derive even more centrally from our own ostensibly free complicity with the tech giants and platform economies that render us ever more into digitized versions of medieval peasants, subject to the all but absolute control of multiple hierarchies.

While drawing aptly on the insights and wisdom of others, the book carves out its own distinctive approach – one that leads to a wonderful array of important and compelling insights. Anticipating the current "tech lash" (i.e., our increasing recognition of the many profoundly negative aspects of our entanglements in social media, the platform ecologies of Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, et al.) by over a decade, Jensen compellingly demonstrates how these engagements constitute a "Medieval feudalism." This is not simply a striking and provocative turn of phrase. It accurately describes specific analogies Jensen convincingly demonstrates between Medieval power structures, norms, and practices, and those established through contemporary regimes of algorithms, Big Data, and largely unregulated platform and surveillance capitalism. These regimes further include specific Medieval-like features of our digital lifeworlds such as total surveillance ("the Internet omnopticon") and online communities complete with "digital pillories," public shaming, and online witch hunts.

Jensen draws from his extensive scholarship and backgrounds in political science, journalism, and media studies to bring together much of the best of contemporary and relevant research and scholarship in political economy and theory, philosophy, media and communication studies into a comprehensive and coherent series of analyses. He starts by doing justice to the complexities of medieval life – both with regard to its many repressive elements as well as to its usually less-heralded cultural flourishing and contributions to what we otherwise mistakenly assume are uniquely modern inventions, institutions, norms, and so on. Jensen then demonstrates in fine-grained detail the close analogies between contemporary digital lives and the Medieval world – specifically in terms of power hierarchies and economic regimes, norms, notions of community, lack of privacy and

surveillance. At the same time, Jensen thereby breaks important new ground as he makes still more articulate and clear what he characterizes as the "break, invisible but vast, with modernity and liberal humanism and democracy" and the Medieval feudalism carefully portrayed here.

In my view, the book thus adds essential substance to and dramatically raises the stakes in current debates and concerns swirling around the threats to democracy and privacy presented by surveillance capitalism, algorithms, AI, Big Data, surveillance via social media, and so on – debates that become increasingly urgent as these technologies are deployed and diffused ever more fully in our lives through the emerging Internet of Things, for example. Jensen's analogies between these contemporary regimes of power and the Middle Ages makes the threats against modern institutions and norms still clearer and sharper.

Most importantly, these analyses do not foreclose all hope. Rather, Jensen's analyses also foreground the many conditions and possibilities of modern democracy, including "discontent and conflicts" as "a fundamental condition." His rich surveys of how internet-facilitated communication can still foster possibilities of dissent and resistance to power are crucial insights and inspiration into how human freedoms, rights, and democracy may survive.

Scholars and researchers in the multiple disciplines intersected here and who are concerned – as we all must be – with sustaining and enhancing democratic rights, norms, and processes against these ever increasing arrays of threats will profit enormously from this book. At the same time, it is written in a clear and accessible style that makes it appropriate and compelling as a textbook. Indeed, anyone interested in better understanding the complex problems of protecting basic citizens' rights and freedoms in democratic regimes vis-à-vis the ever growing temptations to trade these away in the name of consumerism and convenience will find it an invaluable guide and overview."

Charles M. Ess,
Professor in Media Studies, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo

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The Medieval Internet: Power, Politics and Participation in the Digital Age

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Author

Jakob Linaa Jensen, Ph.D., M.A. in Politics, is a Research Director of Social Media at the Danish School of Media and Journalism. Before that he was an Associate Professor of Media Studies at Aarhus University. He has researched social media for 15 years and headed an EU COST task force on social media methods. He has published five monographs, three edited volumes and more than 30 international journal articles. His main research focus is on political and democratic uses of social media and on testing and developing new methods for social media research. His research interests also include political communication, the public sphere, social media, Internet politics and sociology of the Internet and cognitive affordances of new media.

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Acknowledgements

This is a book I have wanted to write for a long time. As grown up in a political science tradition with a strong focus on empirical analysis, I have always been theoretically interested too. My advisor on my master thesis and co-advisor on my dissertation, Jens Peter Frølund Thomsen, already many years ago urged me to make a coherent sociological analysis of the Internet, based on my research as well as my theoretical interests. I have worked on such a book, on and off, for years. I have read many good books on Internet sociology and Internet theory but felt that I myself needed an overall perspective, a story to tell. The idea came when I co-taught with professor Charles Ess, a brilliant mind and really nice person whom I consider a mentor. We discussed online surveillance and I proposed that the Internet was like a medieval village that I described as an omnopticon. In stimulating discussions with Charles and many others, the idea was born. In a busy position, the idea was left as a side kick, something I wrote on when I (not very often) had time. Finally, in 2018 Emerald Publishing approached me and asked for ideas for books. I wrote the draft of this book on a flight between Copenhagen and Montreal, going to the annual Internet Researchers' conference. I presented the idea for Emerald, and I was very pleased about their enthusiasm and quick acceptance of the idea. You are reading the result. I would like to thank Emerald Publishing, not at least Carys Morley, Jen McCall and Katy Mathers for a collaborative and friendly approach and for patience, as writing books always takes longer than you expect! I also extend my thanks to Roger Gathman, who not only assisted me in proof-reading the book but also suggested improvement of points and content, based on almost encyclopedical knowledge.

The book also represents and reflects my own personal and academic transformation over 20 years. Academically, I started as a profound optimist, believing that the Internet could transform democracy and society for the better. That it could be used to liberate, inform and educate. That it could re-vitalise democracy and enhance participation and mobilise the disenfranchised. Through my dissertation and much later work on political culture and debates online, I became increasingly sceptical. Online debates seemed only respectful when the usual suspects, the educated and informed debated. When the rest sporadically entered the debates, they came to resemble the dimmest, smokey taverns, and they came to include the worst human beings can present in terms of intolerance, personal assaults and hate speech. In pure social terms, the Internet fared better, connecting people and creating new friendships and alliances. But this book is more pessimist, more critical, than if I had written it when I first got the idea about 10 years ago.

The annual conferences of the Association of Internet Researchers have been a great source of inspiration throughout my career. I have discussed topics presented in this book, along with almost everything else, with (I believe) the greatest media and communication scholars on this planet. Among the many brilliant minds, I would especially like to thank Annette Markham, Nancy Baym, Steve Jones, Nick Couldry, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Wilfred Wang, Tarleton Gillespie, Andrew Illiadis, Alison Powell, Karine Nahon and Dylan Wittkower for discussing ideas found in this book. I excuse in advance for all the other great minds whose company I have enjoyed but space does not allow me to mention here. Going to AoIR conferences is like a family reunion and to quote Axel Bruns: It is my Alma Mater, my intellectual home.

Ideas for this book have also been developed through inspiring research stays abroad. I will particularly mention a fruitful stay at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, invited by Axel Bruns, among the greatest scholars I know and by all means and incredibly helpful and positive person. At Oxford Internet Institute I was kindly invited by Bill Dutton and besides him I had fabulous conversations of ideas later presented in this book with Ralph Schroeder and Eric Meyer.

I would also like to thank the institutions where I have worked the last decade: The Department of Media and Journalism Studies at Aarhus University where I worked for 10 years with great colleagues of whom I shared ideas for this book with Niels Brügger, Jesper Tække, Anja Bechmann and many others; my present workplace at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, a place where I have enjoyed much freedom to pursuit my research interests and write more than ever before. I am grateful to my kind boss, Helle Kryger Aggerholm, for good leadership and for allowing me a combined writing and travel sabbatical that made it possible to finish this book. I will also thank Roger Buch, Flemming Svith, Poul Thøis Madsen and many other good colleagues for sparring during writing this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Mette Ehlers Mikkelsen, for love and patience while finishing this book. The latter part of book writing took place during a fabulous round-the-world trip, combining work and pleasure for both of us. I believe I came to work more than I had expected and promised, sorry!

I have not been able to mention all who deserves to be thanked for the discussions and inspiration leading to this book. I am sure that many of you will recognise bits of our conversations in the book. I have done a profound effort to quote everywhere I am building on written material and I really do hope I have succeeded. Despite all the written and oral inspiration, the responsibility for the text as you read it is exclusively mine. Happy reading!

Aarhus, Denmark, February 2020.

Introduction

This book is about the Internet and its social and political consequences. Or rather, it is about the Internet as it has become in the age of platform economy, where governments and corporations struggle to dominate a technology that once was believed to be the ultimate medium of freedom. It is also a book about the Middle Ages used as a prism, an analytical tool, to analyse and discuss contemporary trajectories. First and foremost, it is a book about society and power, in all its forms and consequences.

My argument throughout this book is that logics of modern society, caused by the information explosion, the Internet and the way the Internet is used, governed, regulated and, I dare to say, abused, are similar to logics of medieval times. The information landscape might be different, or at least the available amount of information is beyond comparison, but the mechanism by which information is handled sold, regulated, exploited, manipulated and abused is in many ways similar to the Middle Ages.

Neo-medievalism

Using the medieval period as a prism to understand contemporary society is not entirely new. The term neo-medievalism has been used to describe such endeavours. The term is most notably affiliated with Italian sociologist and philosopher Umberto Eco (1986) and his essay 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages'. From his perspective, neo-medievalism is a literary movement where figures and texts from medieval times are used in a contemporary context. His own books, for instance, *Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, are examples of the trend.

In a narrower sense of the word, neo-medievalism has also been used in political theory on international relations. Hedley Bull sees the political order of the modern, globalised world as analogous to medieval Europe, where different kinds of territorial powers, along with the Church, competed for sovereignty. The international political landscape was characterised by complex, overlapping and disputed sovereignties, just like the modern world where technology and global capitalism reduces the sovereignty and political capacity of nation states.

However, the employment of concepts from medieval society goes beyond literature and international political theory. Memes and metaphors originating in medieval society have often been used to describe and explain contemporary society. Social shaming has been described as 'a pillory', good deeds have been

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deemed as knightly, persecution or censorship has been labelled as inquisitions and elitist tendencies in political life are sometimes dubbed feudalism.

At this point, I have to make a disclaimer. When I discuss the medieval and medievalism, I refer to the concepts as they appeared in a Western context. Other cultures, in Asia, in Africa and in the Americas have gone through époques that historians might call medieval with societal characteristics like feudalism, warrior elites and the constructions of castles partly or fully similar to those that appeared in Europe. However, medievalism is so inherently associated with the époque Europe went through in the millennium between the years 500 and 1500 that I, for simplicity and for the sake of my argument, will use the European medieval experience as the reference in the book. However, my analytical chapters draw on examples from Asia, Africa and the Americas as well as Europe. Thus, the book's points and conclusion are globally relevant for everybody experiencing the realm of new digital technologies.

This book will take the concept of neo-medievalism further and argue that terms and concepts originating in medieval society are suitable for describing and discussing a plethora of social and political phenomena, all related to the massive rise and use of new digital media technologies and adherent societal paradoxes, dilemmas and challenges. This is a story about the social and political significance of the Internet in general and social media and the platform economy in particular.

It is a paradox that the Internet, the ultimate symbol of modernity, transparency and enlightenment, facilitates logics of enclosure, censorship and social control. The Internet is used in the service of democracy and freedom movements around the world, but it is also used by dictatorships to clamp down on activists and opposition. It is used to preach the gospel of freedom and to liberate the suppressed and alienated. At the same time sworn enemies of modernity and education, like ISIS, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram use it to advocate their viewpoints and achieve their goals. New media technologies liberate and educate but they are also used to narrow our horizons, create informational bubbles and, wilfully or not, make us more ignorant and less aware of worlds unfamiliar to our own.

This is not a classical discussion of technology as good or evil, of techno-determinism versus social construction of technologies. It is taken for granted that the technology is constructed in a social setting; it affects the very same social setting and those boundaries, whether human actors can change the architecture of technology or the social design. Nothing is a coincidence. All recent social and cultural phenomena have a pre-history. They are a result of wilful or co-incidental individual or societal decisions. And they can be changed through understanding them and the historical trajectories behind them.

Therefore, attempting broad, social analyses, grounded in a historical understanding of humans and society are of utmost importance. I will argue, throughout the book, that the medieval perspective, understanding contemporary digital, social media-savvy society through metaphors and concepts from medieval society, is a useful prism for investigating the social and political challenges facing us 20 years into the twenty-first century. The main argument is that apparently distinct social phenomena related to the spread of new media are related and a product of logics that dominated medieval society, not at least those of control, surveillance and feudalism.

This is not a firm, empirical or scientific investigation. It is rather a coherent set of analyses and reflections, based on 20 years of academic studies of the Internet, addressing as different aspects as democratic debates, political activism, social cooperation, communities, identity, journalism, big data, platform economy and tourism.

From being an optimist, I have become increasingly more sceptical towards the Internet and its consequences. The digital technologies meant to enhance social life, social skills and mutual cooperation came to set us apart from each other. We might be together physically but are mentally apart, separated by our screens. A look at a restaurant, a family setting or any kind of public transportation confirms this. Social media are like playing bingo. You are alone together, to use a term from Sherry Turkle (2012). Even worse, by our eager use of the technologies, we have made a Faustian bargain. We have sacrificed our privacy for convenience. We have sold our data to get access to the social media wonderland. We have got used to free stuff but have not realised that we are the product ourselves. The free, unregulated Internet, the dream of Internet evangelists like John Perry Barlow and Esther Dyson, has been up for grabs. It has been colonised, marketed and dominated by players like the big five, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Google and Amazon. They compete for our attention, for our content consumption, for our money and ultimately for our inner soul, just like the feudal lords, the rising states and the almighty church competed in the Middle Ages. They have an interest in directing our attention, limiting our perspective and making us loyal, just like medieval powers. Censorship is not limited to China, Iran and Russia. Idealistic Western governments have made legislation taking surveillance to a new level that not even George Orwell could imagine. Of course, all for the sake of the greater good! Personally, and professionally, I have become a leaning pessimist. I am too curious to skip social media altogether. And professionally, it is impossible, given my field of research. But I have become much more sceptical, much more at guard and, to be honest, my social media use has decreased the last three years because of the privacy breaches and the scandals but also because I have reflected that it takes up too much of my time.

I write this book to make the readers reflect. In order to understand the present, you need to understand the past. And I believe a return to medieval society makes a good prism to understand the present. I attempt an ambitious analysis across the chapters of the book, of phenomena I claim to be interconnected by dominant logics of control, surveillance and feudalism. Those are the same logics that also characterised medieval society. But at the bottom of all this is a story of power; of the struggle to control individuals and thereby society. There are more competitors for the souls than ever. And the intention, the discourses are more persuasive than ever. I hope this book can contribute to provoke and create reflections and debate. Of course, it is no exhaustive perspective on social and political issues connected to the rise of the Internet and social media. But I hope it can be useful and used.

The medieval period was interesting and gave us many of the inventions and principles we love today, from the printing press to our legal system. But it was also a society very different from the democratic enlightened society to which we have become accustomed. A backlash to medieval logics of control and massive exercise of power at the cost of individual freedom is not necessarily the society we want.

In most works on social media or the Internet drawing on history, the point of departure has been taken in the contemporary media landscape and relevant historical trajectories or similarities have been discussed. More rarely, earlier epochs or phenomena have been used as a prism to discuss the actual issues and problems. Notable exceptions are Tom Standage's two books *The Victorian Internet* (Standage, 1998) and *Writing on the Wall – Social Media the First 2000 years* (Standage, 2013). In both books, the Internet hype of the last 20 years is viewed in a historical context, illustrating that many of the so-called brand-new phenomena are not that new after all. The books by Standage mainly discuss the Internet and social media in technological and media terms although a certain literary perspective is also included.

More recently, Couldry and Meijes (2019) discuss 'data colonialism', using the colonial age as a prism to analyse how data are extracted and capitalised, creating new colonial power holders located mainly in the United States and China. As such, they focus on the economic power and dominance of data and tech companies and the adherent platform economy. Such criticism takes its point of departure in post-colonial studies as well as neo-Marxism. Along the latter tradition, we also find Christian Fuchs (2014) who focusses on the exploitation of digital labour and the surplus value created by exploiting data workers as well as data from ordinary users. Such perspectives are truly relevant when employing an economical or labour market perspective. In this book, however, I claim that one needs to look at an even broader perspective. The information economy and the age of big data is not only about economy, exploitation and financial control, but also about power in the broadest sense of the word, on a micro as well as a macro level.

What I will add particularly in this book is twofold: I will show that a certain historical epoch, the medieval age, can be seen as an analytical prism to discuss many current social and political implications of the rapid advent of networked, digital technologies. Further, I take a particularly sociological and political point of view. I focus on implications for daily social life, at a micro level, I discuss the implications for the social order, for our form of government and I demonstrate that the rise of giant Internet companies fundamentally alter the order of politics.

I will establish an overall comparison between contemporary society and medieval society as the book for now naturally focusses on the similarities. However, it is important to emphasise that the comparison is an analytical focus to highlight interesting comparable logics, as will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The Outline of the Book

The book is organised in eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the medieval period, discusses the life of different types of medieval people and sketches the overall features of medieval society. I will particularly emphasise logics of power, community, space and the body as I will draw on these concepts in the further chapters discussing the age of the Internet in medieval terms.

The second chapter discusses knowledge and information. Initially, it takes a perspective from medium theory, emphasising the important role of media for development of societies throughout history. I also look at medieval landscapes

of information and argue that theoretical concepts of cyberspace and hypertext can be identified already back then. I also point out that present logics of siloisation, platform society and algorithmic filtering, most notably present in the regime of big data, that bears resemblance to medieval logics of information control exercised by the church and the rulers.

The third chapter discusses the Internet as a public. I discuss how visibility has always been fundamentally linked to the public and how medieval organisation of space and visibility is similar to internet communities and platforms. But I also discuss how surveillance is the other side of the visibility coin. I argue that visibility and surveillance are complexly interlinked in what I define as the Internet omnopticon.

The fourth chapter explores the community metaphor. Community is a fundamental concept within sociology. Much early literature on the Internet addressed the net as a possibility to return to ancient (and utopian) forms of community. Community, however, also implies logics of exclusion and social control. Medieval village communities were examples of such double logics and it appears that Internet communities share some of the same logics.

The next two chapters address the concept of power. In the fifth chapter, I discuss power as instrumental and I demonstrate power logics of digital pillories and witch hunts, showing how they operate through logics of shaming, exclusion and fear, not unlike in medieval society. In the sixth chapter, I discuss power from a structural perspective. I argue that the regime of algorithms forms invisible power structures that limit our range of information along with our possible actions. A big problem is that unlike in traditional forms of power, it is difficult to ascribe agency and thus responsibility to power based on algorithms. That raises fundamental questions for agency, and ultimately for the free will and the future of democracy.

In the seventh chapter, I discuss the platform economy and argue that the economic and political power of big tech resembles medieval feudalism. I demonstrate how the operations of big tech companies and their relationship with the consumers have strong similarities to medieval relations between lords and serfs, creating a strong dependency among the subjects. I describe the platform economy as a digital feudalism, working through participation and persuasion where we sacrifice privacy for convenience.

The last and final chapter takes all these discussions in a political context. I show the similarities of our present political realm to a medieval system, both internationally and nationally. States compete with corporations about global power, like medieval states competed with the Church and seem weaker than in industrial society, having lost some of their sovereignty. States fight back, for instance, against Wikileaks or by imposing more control and regulation. When states and corporations collaborate, the citizens are the big losers, just as in the Middle Ages. All these challenge the future of democracy.

In the final conclusion, I sum up on the main conclusions, comparing the Internet society to the society of the Middle Ages. I seek to balance the somehow dystopian view inherent in the previous chapters and show ways of challenging power and pockets of hope and resistance. And I call for action on an individual as well as on a collective level.

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Chapter 1

The Middle Ages and Medieval Ways of Living and Thinking

The Middle Ages are often defined by the time span that extends roughly from the fall of the Western Roman empire to the final fall of the Eastern Roman empire, which lasted about 1,000 years from 476 to 1453. These are, of course, approximations to point to the emergence and dissolution of a historical process. In Denmark, for instance, which was never a part of the Roman empire, one could take the Middle Ages to be marked by the end of the Viking age to the fall of the Catholic Church, a period between 1050 and 1536. The important thing is not to get hung up on specific dates or epoch-changing events, but instead to map out the approximate duration of the period and the structures that spanned 'the High Middle Ages' throughout Europe.

Only in cartoons do Neolithic people know they are living in the Stone Age. These categories, including the Middle Ages, have been accorded retrospectively by the historians of the nineteenth century, who saw themselves as existing in the age of science and progress. Medieval people did not see themselves as living in the Middle Ages but, instead, saw themselves as mostly living in the Last Age, before the Apocalypse. The nineteenth-century historians were building, in part, on the Renaissance humanists, who denigrated the millennium before them as a time of ignorance – the Dark Ages (Mommsen, 1942). Given the humanistic heritage, nineteenth-century historians put the Middle Ages between Late Antiquity and the Renaissance (meaning rebirth), the latter being defined as the era in which classical art, ideas and philosophy were rediscovered – with the implication that the Middle Ages had 'lost' the accumulated knowledge of the ages before it, and had consequently been a period of 'ignorance'. Hence the continuing use of the phrase 'the dark ages', first proposed by Petrarch. However, this contemptuous historical treatment of the Middle Ages has latter been severely criticised by twentieth-century historians, who see it as a vulgar product of a naively positivist historiography, a form of presentism – that is, elevating the present at the expense of the past. In recent historiography, the Middle Ages are recognised as less monolithic, and as having its own creativity. Rather than an absolute rupture in history, historians now recognise in the Middle Ages various elements that have been

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further developed in modernity. Important inventions like the forge, the printing press and the waterwheel originate from the Middle Ages, while modern institutions like banks, universities and courts all trace their origin to this period too. Medieval philosophy was more advanced than the old image of a non-scientific scholasticism – indeed, medieval advances in pure logic have been recognised in modern logical theory – while the art of the novel and the foundation of certain epic tales that have fed European culture all the way up to twenty-first century cinema was laid in the novels written in the high Middle Ages. Cultural values from the Middle Ages like chivalry, knighthood and courtly love became part of the 'civilizing process' in Europe, inspiring bourgeois ideals of the love marriage and the code of the gentry that did much to soften manners and accord women a greater social worth (Wickham, 2016, p. 197).

The Middle Ages have gone in and out of fashion since the 'neo-Gothic' revival in the nineteenth century. For a certain group of traditionalist intellectuals – John Ruskin, William Morris, etc. – the Middle Ages connoted a pre-capitalist age of integrity, before the class war between Capital and Labour. Contemporary culture is less ideological in its fondness for the period, but stereotypical images from what we imagine the Middle Ages to be have spread through books, TV shows and subcultures, creating a palpable Gothic turn in the culture as a whole. Countless medieval markets, which encourage role-playing (and are tightly connected to video game role-playing), have sprung up in Europe and beyond over the last 20 years. Still, we also use the term 'medieval' to denote thoughts, behaviour and punishments we consider barbaric and backwards.

When we think about the Middle Ages, images of kings, knights, castles and tournaments most likely pop up, along with wizards and witches. In the public mind, the old enlightenment accusation of superstition has now become a lore, with magic seeming a vacation from rationality. It is true that horses and knights played an important role as tools of power and means of combat in the Middle Ages. Some, like the famous historian Lynn Townsend White (1962), even claim that the import of the stirrup from Asia, first used in Europe in the battle of Tours in 732, was a fundamental requisite for the constitution of Middle Age society. The stirrup facilitated mounted battle, which put a premium on cavalry, promoting the status of a class of knights, fundamental for medieval warfare and the medieval power structure in general.

In terms of its material life, medieval societies were characterised by a feudal economic structure, which was exhaustively analysed in the classic study by Marc Bloch (1961). It was based on a chain of exploiters and exploited. The kings depended on the vassals for their wealth, who in turn were invested with their fiefs, officially, by the monarch. The holders of these fiefs were, in turn dependents of the local feudal lords – who were often wealthier and more powerful than kings – who themselves appropriated a large share of the produce of the peasants, the majority of the population, who were firmly at the bottom of the societal pyramid and attached by law to the land. The overlapping forms of dependence made for a formally stagnant society in economic terms, as the incentives for those in power were all about conserving the existing economic and political order. However, as we shall see, it was also a time of new inventions, social and cultural development