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Review of Bernhard Jussen, *Das Geschenk des Orest:  
Eine Geschichte des nachrömischen Europa 526–1535*

by Charles West

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## BOOK REVIEWS

BERNHARD JUSSSEN, *Das Geschenk des Orest: Eine Geschichte des nachrömischen Europa 526–1535* (C.H. Beck: Munich, 2023), 480 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 78200 8. €44.00

The ‘Middle Ages’ is a concept deeply embedded in both the academic and the public understanding of the past in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world. It organizes how people think about the past, and thus affects their perception of it, whether they realize it or not. It is, of course, not a concept that was used in the sources from this period—nobody ever thought they were living in the Middle Ages—and in this exciting new book, the Frankfurt historian Bernhard Jussen makes the case that it is high time to abolish it. ‘This book is a provocation’, proclaims the dustjacket, and so it proves to be.

Perhaps the most visible innovation of the book concerns the sources that it highlights. Throughout, Jussen centres not the written sources that most historical work tends to privilege, but visual imagery, using a ‘media studies’ (*Mediologie*) methodology. Each chapter is based around a key image or set of images which Jussen regards as especially telling and treats as a historical sign or *Geschichtszeichen*. These images are used neither to illustrate nor to confirm a written text, but as focal points in their own right, as keys to contemporary perception. By breaking away from the ‘canonical’ written sources in this way, Jussen aims to open up fresh perspectives.

The first two chapters work as a pair. They are focused on the commemorative image of a sixth-century widow named Turtura (or ‘Turtle Dove’), praised for her fidelity to her dead husband; and on the thoroughly traditional ivory diptych of Turtura’s contemporary, the Roman consul Orestes, from which the book takes its name. Jussen’s argument is that the tension between these two representations shows the true transformation of the Roman world. This transformation had very little to do with migrants, invasions, or ‘barbarians’. Rather, the

key was the change in the sacral system (*Sakralsystem*), as Christianity gradually supplanted and overturned established Roman traditions, and this was a change that the Romans brought about themselves.

At the heart of this shift was the revolution it brought about in kinship structures. Jussen proposes that ancient Roman society had been dominated by male ancestry, expressed legally through the role of the *paterfamilias*, and materially through wax casts of dead grandparents' faces and family lineages painted on walls (though very little of this material culture has survived). The form of Christianity that took over in Rome regarded this ancestor veneration with outright hostility. Instead of claims of ancestry and descent, it put the married couple at the heart of society, promoted spiritual kinship in the place of bonds of flesh and blood, and entrusted commemoration to specialists housed in institutions, rather than to the family at the graveside. Turtura's image was painted after her death, yet pointed to the future, whereas Orestes, with his mastery of an ancient symbolic code, was already living in the past.

The third chapter moves to ideas of kingship, and the imagery associated with it. Jussen points out how the misuse of this imagery has in the past led historians astray. A handful of idiosyncratic images of tenth- and eleventh-century Ottonian kings and emperors that depict them as Christ-like were long used by historians to underpin a reading of these rulers as 'sacral'. In reality, the Ottonians and their successors made far fewer claims to sacrality than their imperial peers in Constantinople, whose coins, from the sixth century, were minted with images of Christ and Mary. That was an iconography which Western rulers deliberately avoided. Conversely, the figure of the ruler on horseback, central to Roman imperial imagery, vanished from sculptural representation in both East and West, but Jussen points out that in the West it remained vibrant in other media, such as seals.

Chapter four is devoted to monasticism, viewed through the famous St Gall Plan devised by the monk Gozbert in the ninth century. Jussen highlights two features of this drawing of an idealized monastery: its inclusion of numerous altars, and the absence of an enclosing wall. The multiplication of altars shows how far Western European society was entangled in an economy of salvation that converted financial resources into spiritual welfare through clerical

ritual, while the lack of an enclosure demonstrates how monasteries were supposed to be thoroughly integrated into wider society. Jussen emphasizes that the *Rule of St Benedict* that was so influential in the West was what we might think of today as an inclusive and accessible form of monasticism, which eschewed the dramatic asceticism popular in other monastic practices. That, thinks Jussen, was linked to the way monasticism in the Latin West became mainstream.

The fifth chapter is inspired by a celebrated early fourteenth-century fresco in Siena's town hall, the Palazzo Pubblico. This fresco depicts personified virtues, including a representation of Concord or Unity holding a carpenter's plane to smooth over disagreement and dissent. From this image, Jussen develops a discussion of urban collective organization and self-representation as a form of participatory government and indeed civil society, which he sees as being in irreconcilable tension with traditional forms of top-down governance.

The book closes with another pair of chapters. Chapter six studies the popular motif of the mourning widow at her husband's graveside who encounters an attractive man. The tale was told, and represented, in various ways, including numerous woodcut prints from the fifteenth century on. But in all of them it reflected a challenge to the world-view of the faithful widow Turtura, for this widow was not quite so unequivocally loyal to her spouse. The final chapter looks at a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger in the early sixteenth century, *An Allegory of the Old and New Testaments*. Jussen reads this painting as a frontal attack on the conventions of figural representation promoted by the established Catholic Church, and thus as part of the reworking of the sacral system first established in the sixth century.

Given that the book's shape effectively reproduces a narrative of the Middle Ages – a millennium between ancient Rome and the Reformation, dominated by Catholic Christianity – what, then, is Jussen's objection to the concept? The answer lies in its connotations and associations. For instance, Jussen argues that the term skews discussion of artistic production at the court of the Carolingian kings. Conventional periodization insists that 'medieval' art was religious. That makes it harder to see that in fact these Carolingian debates freed artists from some of the burdens placed upon them by conventions of representing the sacred which remained embedded in Constantinople.

However, the central issue for Jussen is kinship and family structure. The association between the Middle Ages and family structures such as clans and lineages has, in his view, blocked the reception of anthropologically inspired research on kinship, to which research Jussen has himself made many distinguished contributions. This research presents more or less the opposite picture of the received wisdom about the Middle Ages: that this 'millennium of the turtle dove' (p. 61) was characterized by surprisingly weak kinship structures, with huge consequences both politically and culturally, since Jussen regards kinship as foundational to the social order more broadly.

In such a bold and wide-ranging book, there are of course points at which specialists may cavil. Jussen's focus on long-term kinship structures that were established in the sixth century and endured thereafter perhaps understates the subsequent changes in these structures prior to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The formal prohibition on priests' marriage in the eleventh century, for instance, was a quite radical step that finds little discussion here. Put differently, does it really make sense to talk of the Latin West in the twelfth century (and indeed later) as 'post-Roman'—in other words, as still meaningfully contained within a late Roman legacy?

Equally, one could argue that in other respects, the book is not long-term enough. For instance, one of the key features of kinship in the Latin West was monogamy, that is to say, the rule that both men and women can only be married to one person at a time. Many people today take this rule for granted, yet in reality it is far from a cultural universal, and in many parts of the world it is not the accepted framework for the social order. Marital monogamy was not, however, a product of the sixth century, or even of Christianity. It had deeper roots in pagan Roman culture, linked, perhaps, to Rome's distinctive private property regime. Its survival and indeed hardening in these post-Roman centuries shows that sixth-century Christianity did not, after all, change everything about kinship in Western Europe.

This book, then, certainly provokes counter-arguments. Yet it is not only a very stimulating read, but its central observation merits serious reflection. The notion of the Middle Ages takes its meaning from a world-view that supposed that modern society had much

more in common with antiquity than with the time of political chaos and religious intolerance 'in between'. Variants of this argument are still alive and kicking. But Jussen's insight is that today's pluralist civil society – the vantage point from which he suggests historians in the Western world now survey the past, after the end of the Cold War – actually has less in common with ancient authoritarian empires than with the collaborative and associational networks that replaced them, and whose origin and development this book is devoted to exploring and explaining.

As Jussen suggests, these are resonances and associations that the concept of the Middle Ages obscures, and was indeed designed to obscure. It might be argued that historians of the Middle Ages have signed a Faustian pact that on the one hand gives their research a recognized and, to some limited extent, protected place within the discipline, but at the price of explicitly coding it as not actually relevant for their colleagues, or for that matter everyone else. We do not share the *Weltsicht* (world-view) of the generations around 1800, so is it not time that historians started seriously thinking about approaches to the distant past that better suit our contemporary conjuncture, just as Bernhard Jussen does here?

CHARLES WEST is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Edinburgh. He has recently published a book on the Carolingian kingdom of Lothar II, and is currently co-leading a collaborative Anglo-German research project on local priests in the tenth-century Latin West.