Medieval, the Middle Ages

By Fred C. Robinson

As the italicization of the words in my title indicates, my concern this morning is with the terms medieval and Middle Ages, not with the period itself. Members of the Medieval Academy of America, whether historians, philologists, iconographers, Byzantinists, or specialists in any of the other disciplines that enrich our Academy, will all presumably have a common interest in the terms by which our subject matter is known to the world at large. I propose to begin by offering some observations on the pronunciation and spelling of our terms and then turn to the matter of the origin of medieval and Middle Ages and the puzzling question as to why English has a plural noun Middle Ages whereas other major European languages seem to have a singular — moyen âge, edad media, Mittelalter, medioevo, and so on. Finally, I shall give some attention to the meaning and popular usage of terms like medieval and Middle Ages in the various languages of Europe and shall try to draw some conclusions from this as to the status our subject has in the world community.

I begin with pronunciation. I see no problems in the case of the term Middle Ages. For medieval, however, dictionaries and manuals of elocution record several pronunciations, the two most prominent of which are [ˌmiːdˈɪvəl] and [ˌmedˈɪvəl], the former being recommended by American authorities, the latter by British. Which is correct? In the Latin word from which medieval is derived, the first vowel is short (med-), a fact which may seem to justify the Englishman’s way with the word. But this is false logic, for both English and American speakers pay little attention generally to the pronunciation guidance offered by Latin etymons. Certainly few Englishmen are persuaded to give up their pronunciation of vitamin ([ˈvɪtəmən]) merely because the Latin long i in vita supports the American pronunciation. And the pronunciation [med-] in the Englishman’s medieval is itself inconsistent with his own usual pronunciation of the same root in other words: one does not hear in England of “mass [ˈmɛdɪə],” nor do Englishmen pronounce the e short in mediocre or immediately. 1 The pronunciation of medieval is simply one more of those instances where Englishmen and Americans agree to pronounce the same word differently without either nation trying to impose its pronunciation on the other.

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1 Although I have not heard it myself, my authority on British pronunciation indicates that a short e is occasionally heard in the first syllable of mediocre in England: see Daniel Jones, Everyman’s English Pronouncing Dictionary, 11th ed. (New York, 1956), p. 302.
I hesitate to draw attention to the other recorded pronunciations of *medieval* for fear that someone may be induced to imitate them. Most egre- gious, perhaps, is the pronunciation of the word as if it were spelled *medieval*. This has been recorded and condemned in usage manuals, but colleagues inform me that they still hear it today. Other pronunciations, which modern dictionaries regard as acceptable variant pronunciations, seem nonetheless to be somehow unpleasant to me. I refer to the pronunciations which reduce *medieval* to a trisyllable: [ˌmɪdˈiːvəl], [ˌmedˈiːvəl], [ˌmɔdˈiːvəl]. I am not sure why these pronunciations strike my ear so gratingly. Perhaps they remind me of that curious coinage introduced into English in 1840 to refer to our period, *mideval*, which was formed, apparently, by analogy with *primeval* and *coeval*. I am grateful that this strange hybrid did not last, and I think we should avoid inadvertently reviving it with a trisyllabic pronunciation of *medieval*.

Whim plays a role in pronunciation preferences, as my own confessed prejudices have just illustrated. In matters of spelling, however, we seek an authority who will make binding decisions, even if those decisions are purely arbitrary. Should we spell *medieval* with the digraph *æ* or simply with *e*? Fowler recommends the form with *e*, as do many authorities in America as well as England. And yet university presses on both sides of the Atlantic continue here and there to affect the digraph, and we must face the fact that in our profession today there exists a state of orthographic anomy verging on an identity crisis in respect to this question. Are we medievalists or mediævalists? In the fair city of Toronto alone the Pontifical Institute of Mediæval Studies stands firmly in the ranks of the digraph, while the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies, which is only a short walk from the Institute, rallies behind the spelling with *e*. Even when the names of the two institutions appear together (as they sometimes do) on the title page of one and the same book, each clings tenaciously to its own spelling of *medieval*.

It is odd that this onomastic schism should exist, for the question as to which spelling is correct was settled once and for all in 1980 when, in its revision of its By-Laws the Medieval Academy of America announced that henceforth it would adhere exclusively to the spelling with *e*. To this authoritative decree nothing need be added. And yet I will add just one approving observation on the Academy’s resolution of the question. Since the reduction of the Classical Latin digraph *æ* to *e* is usually cited in hand-
books as one of the symptoms of Medieval Latin (as opposed to Classical Latin), it seems only logical that we should preserve this bit of mediaevalia in the name we assign to our field of study. The force of this argument is for me undiminished by the fact that the Latin word _medievalis_ is neither classical nor medieval in origin, but Neo-Latin.

I turn now to the grammatical number of English _Middle Ages_, a problem which will require that we investigate the Latin source for European words referring to the medieval period. In a study which has long been cited as authoritative, George Gordon assembles a number of facts about the English and Latin words for the Middle Ages, and in the course of his study he twice observes that the plural form is an English peculiarity, all other languages using a singular form.\(^4\) Now it is true that many of the languages that will spring first to mind do have a singular noun meaning "Middle Ages." German _Mittelalter_, Italian _medioevo_, French _moyen âge_, Spanish _edad media_, Greek _μεσαίον_ (or, the now more usual demotic form, _μεσαῖονας_), Danish and Norwegian _middelalderen_ are all singular. But Gordon was in error when he said that English is the _only_ language that has a plural form. Dutch _Middeleeuwen_ is plural, as are Russian _средневека\(^5\)_ and Modern Icelandic _miðaldir_. (Modern Hebrew and Modern Arabic use plural forms as well, but I believe we can safely disregard terms in these languages since they would almost certainly be recent coinages modeled on European nomenclature; that is, they are simply translations of the English, or possibly the Russian, plural forms.)

The Dutch plural _Middeleeuwen_ is explained by Kluge in his etymological dictionary as resulting from the fact that in Dutch _eeuw_ can mean "century" as well as "age" or "era," and therefore the Dutch must use the plural lest someone think there was but a single medieval century.\(^6\) One could advance the same rationale for Russian _средневека_ since _век_ too can serve to mean "century" (if one chooses not to use the more normal _столетие_).

But this explanation will not do for English or Icelandic, and I suspect it is also somewhat doubtful as an explanation for the Russian form — especially when we see that in Polish the same compound, _średniowiecze_, is invariably singular, as is the Czech _středověk_. In Slovene, moreover, where _vek_ is the normal term for "century," the word for Middle Ages is the singular _srednjoveski_. If there is no problem with the dual meanings of _vek_ and _wiecz_ in these closely related languages, why should _средневека_ require a plural in Russian?

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\(^5\) Russian also has a singular form, _средневековье_, but the plural seems to be more common, as is the case in English.

Here it is necessary to investigate where each of the European words for "Middle Ages" originated. If one consults the standard reference works on the subject, they will usually explain that all the European words are simply calques or loan translations of the Latin phrase *medium ævum*, an explanation that leaves one all the more puzzled as to why some of the European vernaculars should have wound up with a singular and others with a plural form. The earliest English attestation recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is dated 1722 and has the surprising plural form — *Middle Ages*. Recently, however, the new *Supplement* to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, volume *H–N* (published in 1976), has supplied earlier documentations of both singular and plural forms from the writings of John Donne, Thomas James, Henry Spelman, and others, the earliest of these antedating the word to 1616. The *Supplement* records the adjectival form *middle-aged*, moreover, as early as 1611. This presses the date of the introduction of the English term almost as far back as the date of the earliest documentation of Latin *medium ævum*, which was used by Melchior Goldast in 1604.

The assumption that all the modern vernaculars derived their terms for "Middle Ages" by translating *medium ævum* is, however, erroneous. As Gordon has shown, Neo-Latin writings (wherein the term as well as the idea certainly originated) display a variety of ways of expressing the idea "Middle Age(s)," including *media ætas*, *media antiquitas*, *medium sæculum*, and *media tempestas* as well as the plural forms *media sæcula* and *media tempora*. The earliest of these is documented in 1469 (*media tempestas*). The earliest documentations for the plurals *media tempora* and *media sæcula* are 1531 and 1625 respectively, and it is interesting to note that Englishmen were among the earliest users of the Latin plural terms: Henry Spelman was the first person to use *media sæcula*, and although *media tempora* appeared first in a book published in Switzerland, Francis Bacon used the term sometime before 1620 in the *Novum Organum*. So, before Neo-Latin writers settled down with the term *medium ævum*, which became more or less standard in Latin usage, there was this plethora of terms for "Middle Ages," and the various vernaculars were modeling their terms on the whole range of Neo-Latin terms, both singular and plural. It is no surprise, then, that some of the modern languages should have a singular term today (e.g., French,

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8 Most of the *Supplement*’s antedatings seem to be derived from Gordon, "*Medium Aevum*.”

9 The full context supplied by *Supplement* s.v. *middle-aged* 2 is as follows: "The open or secret wrongs done vnto Fathers, auncient, middle-aged, or moderne writers, by the Papists." The quotation is from the advertisement to a religious polemic by T. James.

10 In *Paraeneticorum veterum pars I*, p. 380.

11 See Gordon, "*Medium Aevum*,” p. 12, n. 1.
German, Italian, Danish, Greek, Polish) while others (English, Dutch, Russian, Icelandic, and their imitators) have plural forms.

When one examines the emergence of terms for "Middle Ages" in the various vernaculars, one finds, not surprisingly, that a number of different terms, some singular and some plural, were often tried out before the standard modern term became standard. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry shows, English had at different times both *Middle Age* and *Middle Ages*, to say nothing of a host of also-rans like *Barbarous Age(s)*, *Dark Age(s)*, *Obscure Age(s)*, *Leaden Age(s)*, *Monkish Ages*, *Muddy Ages*, and of course the eighteenth-century favorite, *Gothic Period*. Similarly, German *Mittelalter* had to compete with the plural *die mittleren Zeiten* as well as with *das mittlere Zeitalter* and *die Mittelzeit*. The Dutch plural *Middeleeuwen* had to compete with the singular *Middeltijd*. Why a language ends up choosing a singular or a plural form is probably a question which cannot be answered definitively. Chance very likely plays a major role. But whatever the reason, the result is not in doubt. Surely speakers of those languages which use a plural form will be more likely to think of the medieval period as a succession of subperiods rather than as an unbroken continuum of years.

Before leaving the matter of the origin of the terms for the Middle Ages, it may be well to mention that from time to time scholars have thought that the idea of a "Middle Age" actually existed in the Middle Ages themselves. Thus St. Augustine speaks of things happening "in hoc interim seculo," and Julian of Toledo in the seventh century speaks of his time as a "tempus medium." But the context of these phrases shows that this is not our concept at all. These medieval Christians are referring to the "middle" period between the Incarnation and Judgment Day. In this sense we are still living in the Middle Ages. It is only with the Renaissance that writers begin to identify a Middle Age between Antiquity and the modern period. On this matter Theodor E. Mommsen has written eloquently in "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,'" *Speculum* 17 (1942), 226–42.

I turn now to the question of the meaning and status of the words *medieval* and *Middle Ages*. As for setting the precise dates at which the Middle Ages begin and end, you may expect only crafty evasions from me. Scholars have advocated many different termini for our period, and there seems to be little agreement and indeed little basis for reasoned argument on these points. The Middle Ages begin, we are told, with the death of Theodosius in 395, or with the settlement of Germanic tribes in the Roman Empire, or with the sack of Rome in 410, or with the fall of the Western Roman Empire (usually dated A.D. 476), or even as late as the Moslem occupation of the Mediterranean. It ends, according to Oscar Halecki, with the fall of Constantinople, or

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12 See Kluge, loc. cit.
with the invention of printing, or with the discovery of America, or with the beginning of the Italian wars (1494), or with the Lutheran Reformation (1517), or with the election of Charles V (1519). Several reference works I have consulted simply assert that the Middle Ages ended in 1500, presumably on New Year's Eve. Yet another terminus often given for the Middle Ages is the so-called “Revival of Learning,” that marvelous era when Humanist scholars “discovered” classical texts and restored them to mankind after the long Gothic night. Medievalists must always smile a little over these “discoveries,” for we know where the Humanists discovered those classical texts — namely, in medieval manuscripts, where medieval scribes had been carefully preserving them for mankind over the centuries.

There is an added difficulty of periodization in that the Middle Ages last longer in some countries than others. Italy seems somehow well into the Renaissance at a time when much of the rest of Europe is still happily medieval. I have been shown medieval churches in Finland which date from the seventeenth century. And in Russia the Middle Ages seem to last almost as long as the winter. The dictionary of the Russian language published by the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. defines the limits of the Middle Ages as follows: “Embracing the period from the collapse of the Roman slave-holding empire (end of the fifth century) to the beginning of capitalism (end of the seventeenth century).” The Marxist tinge of this definition is enhanced by quotations from Maxim Gorki which reflect a conception of the Middle Ages which could only have been derived from an Eisenstein film. In view of all this disagreement over the duration of the Middle Ages, perhaps we should content ourselves with saying that our period extends from the close of the classical period to the beginning of the Renaissance. If classicists and Renaissance scholars don’t know when their periods begin and end, then that is their problem.

One topic which deserves passing mention here is the term Dark Ages, a concept which Lucie Varga examines in a monograph which was published in 1932 and is still definitive. In popular encyclopedias and in many of the older dictionaries Dark Ages is defined as simply a synonym of Middle Ages. In 1904, however, W. P. Ker in his book The Dark Ages said that the two terms “have come to be distinguished, and the Dark Ages are now no more than the first part of the Middle Age, while the term medieval is often restricted to the later centuries, about 1100 to 1500. . . .” This is a distinction which

15 Akademiia nauk SSSR, СЛОВАРЬ СОВРЕМЕННОГО РУССКОГО ЛИТЕРАТУРНОГО ЯЗЫКА, 14 (Moscow, 1963), s.v. Средневековье, я, ср. Историческая эпоха, охватывающая время от крушения Римской рабовладельческой империи (конец V в.) до начала капитализма (конец XVII в.).
16 Lucie Varga, Das Schlagwort vom “Finsteren Mittelalter” (Baden, 1932).
17 W. P. Ker, The Dark Ages (Edinburgh, 1904), p. 11.
was for a time carefully observed by some historians, such as Sir Frank Stenton in his book *Anglo-Saxon England*. Here *Dark Ages* consistently refers to Pre-Conquest England and *Middle Ages* and *medieval* to Post-Conquest. The reason the term *Dark Ages* has fallen into disrepute may be inferred from such entries as the following in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, second edition, which says s.v. *Middle Ages*, "The term *Dark Ages* is applied to the whole, or, more often, to the earlier part of the period because of its intellectual stagnation."18 If we could rehabilitate this term by interpreting *dark* as referring not to the qualities of the period but to our dim perception of the period (owing to limited documentary evidence about it), then the *Dark Age–Middle Age* distinction might be worth reviving or retaining. A similar segmentation of the period seems to serve scholars well in Swedish, where *medeltiden*, when used in the context of Swedish history, is said to begin with the conversion to Christianity around A.D. 1000, the period before that being designated by the nonpejorative term *Vikingertiden* 'the Viking era'.19 Similarly, the Finns sometimes restrict the meaning of *keskiaika* 'Middle Ages' to the late *Middle Ages*, the earlier period (or "Dark Ages") being called "the Age of the *Kalevala,*" although this usage seems now to be on the wane. But periodization being the vexed question it is, some will be reluctant to complicate our subject with elaborate subdivisions of time periods. We all know how eminent historians in this Academy and elsewhere began discovering Renaissance in the twelfth century, and then the tenth century, and then the Carolingian period, much to the confusion of simple souls. And then the French introduce *haut moyen âge* and *bas moyen âge* (with their resulting English counterparts), while the Germans have given us *Früh-*, *Hoch-*, and *Spätmittelalter*, and there are many other such subdivisions. In view of all this, it seems almost providential that the English language wound up with a plural noun to designate the period.

We turn now to the last question I have posed about the words for *medieval* and *Middle Ages* in the various European languages, namely, the status they have in the world and what we can gather from this status about the popular standing of our subject. We may begin by asking how much the public at large thinks about things medieval at all. To get a reading on this issue I turned to the word-frequency study published at Brown University by Henry Kučera and the erstwhile medievalist W. Nelson Francis.20 These scholars made a statistical analysis of words in a corpus consisting of a carefully selected cross-section of contemporary American English, including newspaper articles, learned journals, fiction, humor, and other specimens of present-day writing in our country. Their corpus included 1,014,232 words

19 Svenska Akademien, *Ordbok över Svenska Språket*, 17 (Lund, 1945), s.v. *medeltiden*.
all told. How many times does the word medieval occur in that corpus? Exactly eighteen — the same number of occurrences logged for the words aluminum, angel, Arkansas, Tokyo, the date 1945, and the numeral 400. But then Renaissance appeared only twenty times, and classical only thirty-three times. Modern, not surprisingly, occurred 198 times. What is depressing about these statistics, however, is that most of the eighteen times that medieval occurred it probably had nothing to do with the historical period we study, for medieval is most often used in Modern English simply as a vague pejorative term meaning “outmoded,” “hopelessly antiquated,” or even simply “bad.” Renaissance and classical, although they too refer to long-ago periods of history, are never used in this pejorative way. It is this troubling phenomenon which will occupy the remainder of my discussion.

When we look at the words for medieval in other European vernaculars, we find that they too are often used in simple pejorative senses. A German calls his government’s attitude toward illegal narcotics mittelalterlich, while a young Greek would refer to the same attitude as μεσαιωνικός. An antiquated, inefficient bureaucratic procedure is dismissed by a Polish student as średniowieczny. A Finnish newspaper condemns the toilets in modern Finnish prisons as keskiaikainen. This is something medievalists should ponder. It gives us a realistic picture of the preconceptions about the Middle Ages which students all over the world are likely to bring to our subject.

Recently I spent some time looking through the citations for medieval and Middle Ages in the hospitable offices of the Merriam-Webster Company in Springfield, Massachusetts. Adding what I learned there to my own private log of popular uses of these terms, I concluded that we medievalists have an image problem on our hands. And the problem is apparently growing, for the first and second editions of Webster’s New International Dictionary (published in 1909 and 1934) record no pejorative sense for the adjective medieval, while the third edition, published in 1961, adds the sense “antiquated, outmoded,” presumably because occurrences of the word in this sense have been increasingly common in Merriam-Webster’s files on current usage. The day I spent inspecting Merriam-Webster’s files I saw citations from books, newspapers, and magazines in which the most astonishing array of modern phenomena were stigmatized as “medieval” when the writer disapproved of them: the British coal industry, General Electric Company, labor laws, the Carnegie Commission, streetcars, certain methods of photocopying documents, peep shows, the method of trash disposal in Los Angeles, and the weather in Northern Europe. The entire state of Tennessee is dismissed as “medieval,” and the steel mills of Pittsburgh are “medieval-ashes.” Venereal disease in San Antonio is said to be related to that city’s “medieval political structure,” while Rolling Stone Magazine (May 11, 1972, p. 16) complains that Rock and Roll was destroyed by “the medievalism of union officials.” David Halberstam in 1971 says that Ford Motor Company is “sick” because of the “medieval quality” of its production practices (Horper’s Magazine for February, p. 45), and a character in a novel complains that his car has “a medieval
carburetur.” Even the future is called “medieval” if one thinks it will be bad: The New Yorker for July 12, 1982, says the dystopian movie Blade Runner depicts “a medieval future” (p. 82). Most dismaying of all, the most widely known medievalist of our time, J. R. R. Tolkien, recently was reported in the London Review of Books (5/13 [1983], 16) to have habitually used the adjective medieval as a term of abuse when he was denouncing the way things were managed in his Oxford college.

I am especially annoyed by the way ultramodern techniques for administering torture and waging war are frequently described as “medieval.” In Time magazine, December 13, 1968, p. 38, I saw reference to the “medieval tortures” which had been inflicted on political prisoners in Greece. The “medieval tortures” consisted of beating people with plaited steel wire and applying electric shocks to sensitive parts of their bodies. An uncomfortable writing desk is described in one Merriam-Webster citation as “a medieval instrument of torture.” Last November 30 my attention was arrested when Tom Brokaw on NBC Nightly News announced that the Dutch beer magnate Freddie Heineken had been kidnapped and held in “medieval conditions.” Mr. Brokaw went on to explain that Mr. Heineken was held captive in a concrete block room and fed takeout dinners from a local Chinese fast-food restaurant.

The New York Times Magazine, February 2, 1975, describes the Molotov cocktails and random bombings in Northern Ireland as — what else? — “medieval warfare in the twentieth century.” Jacobo Timmerman in a book published less than two years ago describes Israel’s electronically guided bombarding, rocketing, and shelling of civilian populations in Beirut as “a descent into the darkness of a disguised Middle Ages.”21 In usages such as these medieval and Middle Ages seem to mean simply “evil,” and I have sometimes wondered whether there may not be a folk-etymological misconception that the syllable -eval in medieval has something to do with evil. A 1972 article in Commentary (April issue, p. 90) overtly associates the two words: “Céline was of a medieval turn of mind: he needed a principle of evil so as to be able to justify his ferocious indignation. . . .” Another bizarre verbal association may be reflected in a New York Times Magazine article (January 27, 1918) wherein medieval in the pejorative sense is spelled medieaeval; but I nurse the hope that this may be a printer’s error.

A remarkable subcategory of pejorative medieval is the frequent use of it to refer to a government or ruler which the writer means to describe as tyrannical or totalitarian. Around 1980 writers for most newspapers and magazines seem to have reached the conclusion that medieval was an official title of the Ayatollah Khomeini, so rarely does his name appear in print without medieval prefixed to it. And this despite the fact that Persia never really had a Middle Ages, being outside the orbit of Western Europe.

Similarly, during the First World War the Kaiser, according to Merriam-Webster’s files, was with monotonous regularity called a “medieval” ruler, and his allies were similarly described. The Yale Review in 1917, for example, speaks of people living “under the mediaeval yoke of Austria-Hungary, without the most fundamental rights” (p. 99). The dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary only came into being with the Ausgleich of 1867, but never mind. The New York Times on July 7, 1918, solemnly observes that “one outcome of the present war may be that the masses will themselves join in a movement to liberate their land from the mediaeval Bastille of the boche.” The Bastille prison was completed in 1557 and is usually associated more with the French than with the “Boche.” But the real bêtise underlying all these absurdities is the notion that political absolutism, which was institutionalized only in the Renaissance and eighteenth century, is somehow synonymous with the Middle Ages, a period when, in fact, the power of monarchs was usually limited by the counterbalancing power of the church, of consultative bodies like the Anglo-Saxon witenagemot, of feudal lords, and of medieval customs generally. Still the misconception gains strength year by year. In the October 1975 issue of Esprit, for example, occurs the sentence, “In amateur athletics, officialdom has an almost medieval power over athletes” (p. 42).

Even the word medievalist, the term by which we proudly identify ourselves in the academic community, has become contaminated in the process of this sinister semantic trend. When Senator Hubert Humphrey in 1964 rudely attacked one of his Senate colleagues, the Saturday Evening Post (October 10, 1964, pp. 83–84) reported that “the medievalists froze him out of the Senate’s inner councils.” The optimists among us who assume from this sentence that we medievalists are at last moving into the centers of power where we so richly deserve to be are destined for disappointment. For this reporter, medievalist simply means anyone whose political views strike him as offensively retrograde.

Against all this antimedieval mischief recorded in my files and in those of Merriam-Webster, I can set only three lonely examples of medieval used in a purely positive sense. A Princeton University Press book on the Pennsylvania Dutch speaks of “serene . . . countrysides over which the peace-loving Pennsylvania Germans have woven their medieval spell. . . .”22 The New Yorker for November 29, 1952, describes a man as having “a gentle, handsome, medieval face” (p. 39). And an Australian novelist remarks, with seeming approval, that a teacher “was medievally fond of students,” although even here might lurk a leering allusion to Abelard and Eloise.23

I should perhaps repeat that the use of medieval in a purely disparaging sense is not limited to English. The same usage is common in most European

languages, although there are subtle and interesting differences among them. The French, in their elegant way, preserve the integrity of their adjective médiéval, using it exclusively as a historical term. But as a term of disparagement they use moyenâgeux. Perhaps the most outspokenly disparaging definition of our term is the pejorative sense recorded in Ushakov's explanatory dictionary of the Russian language, where the adjective средневековый is said to mean "not in accord with the ideas of modern civilization, barbarian, inhuman, typical of the Middle Ages." 24 My first thought on reading this was that Marxist ideology was inciting the lexicographer to a frenzy of disparagement. But on reflection, and after querying some native speakers, I came to suspect that the explanation lies elsewhere. The Middle Ages (средневека) are for the Russian a foreign phenomenon, something that happened far away in Western Europe, not "Russian-medieval" (древнерусский). This feeling that the term refers to something not merely primitive but also alien might intensify the pejorative meaning of the word. This curious situation may also serve to remind us of the importance of considering the national perspective from which speakers of each language view the Middle Ages and to adjust accordingly for any assessment expressed from that perspective.

One happy note: from a study of the Swedish dictionaries and from conversations with native speakers of Swedish, I gather that that enlightened nation does not normally use medeltida as a simple pejorative. I think this was confirmed when Swedish Finns who had been asked to translate for me some Finnish sentences containing the word for "medieval" (keskiaikainen) in a disparaging sense refused to use the Swedish equivalent medeltida for keskiaikainen. They insisted that in Swedish the only proper rendering would be ålderdomligt 'antiquated', hemskt 'horrible', or grymma 'grim'. 25

In conclusion, I confess that I have no sure remedy to offer for the sorry semantic state of medieval and Middle Ages in popular thought today. We could perhaps counterattack by complaining loudly about the depraved Renaissance absolutism of the Ayatollah Khomeini or about the Classical Greek carburetor in our lemon of a car, but I don’t think we would have much success. Probably our best course is simply to correct wherever we can such misconceptions as come to our notice, and especially misconceptions among students, who are the ones who concern me most. I might cite in

24 Dmitri N. Ushakov, Толковый словарь русского языка (Moscow, 1940), s.v. СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОЙ: Не corresponding понятия современной цивилизации, варварский, негуманный, характерный для средневековья (книжн.).
25 The three sentences referred to a rural method of hiring mailmen (Ajan suunthe, 1937, 271, s. 4, p. 2), to prison conditions in Finland (Vapaa Sana, 1944, no. 7 B, p. 2), and to the Franco government (Suomen Kuvaletki, 1975–76). In the case of another sentence, however, the Swedish speakers considered the use of medeltida acceptable: “Using phosphorous bombs on innocent civilians was an example of truly medieval cruelty” ("... var ett exempel på verklig medeltida grymhet").
closing an experience of my own a few years ago. When I was chairman of Medieval Studies at Yale, I received once a letter from a high-school student who informed me he was writing for his history class an essay on torture, and he wanted to know whether the chairman of Medieval Studies wouldn't be willing to give him some expert advice on the subject. In response I told him that contrary to his expectation, torture was no more a parameter of medieval life than it was of life in other periods, and I suggested that the Middle Ages were perhaps less given to torture than were earlier and later periods. In ancient Greece it appears that the testimony of slaves was admissible evidence only when given under torture, I observed, and we know from the accounts of pagan Rome's persecution of Christians that torture was not unknown in the later classical period. The Renaissance, moreover, could lay juster claim to Torquemada than could the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{26} I apologized to my young correspondent for the relative poverty of torture in the medieval era, and in an effort to be helpful I referred him sadly to the experts who are in a position to know more about torture than any medievalist would know. I referred him to the chairman of Yale's interdisciplinary program in Modern Studies.\textsuperscript{27}

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\textsuperscript{27} For help on various points of language I am grateful to Dmitri Gutas, Merja Kytö, Andrei Navrosov, and George Schoolfield, and above all to Frederick C. Mish, Editorial Director of the Merriam-Webster Company in Springfield, Massachusetts.