

THE MIDDLE AGES IN FOUR ENLIGHTENED FRENCHMEN

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the “civilisation-barbarity” paradigm that 18th-century French historiography, referring to the “State” of late-medieval society, associated with the situation of the laws and their enforcement by the authority. We consider that these intellectuals consolidated the pejorative image of the Middle Ages, converting it into an axiom in Western culture. We use revenge and contempt for the medieval as the focus of the analysis.

KEYWORDS

Revenge, Feudalism, Germanic Law.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Vindicta, Feudi, Ius Germanicus.

1. Introduction

The 19th century saw the high point of the conflictive dialectic between civilisation and barbarity, which had been initiated by enlightened philosophers in the 18th century. This radical opposition was neither innocent nor neutral but rather carried an intense moral load, and thus would be a powerful influence on the 19th-century view of the distant and recent past. In this antinomy, there was an integral vision of the reality, in other words, an ideological perspective that belittled any non-European culture. The great aspiration of the European nations of that century was to reject barbarity and become a civilised society. To do so, they needed a set of ideals of unity and virtuous customs, none of which could be instituted without a set of laws wisely and rigorously administered by a strong centralised state, the unique guarantor of order. Absorbed by this environment, the historians looked to Antiquity, particularly the Roman world, where, through the study of the laws, they discovered a society they considered “ordered” by a “State” that enforced the law.

With the power of such ideas, it was to be expected that the 19th-century historiography had already formed an opinion (actually a moral judgment) about the medieval judicial system, as the “Roman State”, fading over the last imperial century, had left the West in a kind of “natural state”, according to certain historians.

Concerned with the correct application of the laws, the traditional history of law tried to discover and study a “Rule of Law” in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, an institutionalism constituted, like the one, it was said, had existed before the ruin of the Western Roman world, and also later in the modern world. However, the medieval epoch saw very varied forms of conflict resolution, notable among which were the ordeals, arbitrations, compositions and revenge or blood feuds.

We present below the paradigm of civilisation and barbarity that the 19th-century historiography, interested in the “State” of high medieval society, associated with the situation of the laws and their enforcement by the authorities. Only this way can one understand that the ordeals and revenge could be a topic of study by historians.

2. The “natural state” of the Early Middle Ages

It is an interpretive theory, a paradigm, a set of ideas organised through a logic or, if one will, a prior framework of references for analysing the events of the past. As usually happens with the past, the theory through which it is interpreted as also responding to the conditions of the historical environment of the historian.

Regarding this theme, the context is the intellectual debate (typically 19th-century, loaded with nationalism) that disturbed both the great German historians who attempted to emphasise the peculiar sense of justice (and not barbarity) of the Germans, and the also the great French historians who sought to demonstrate the strong Romanisation of the Gallo-Roman population in the epoch of the Germanic invasions, compared with the “primitive” customs that the latter introduced



into Gaul. This would have evident consequences in the French historiography dedicated to the history of justice, given that the law historians were little drawn to the medieval period. While the right to revenge was in force in the legal system of the Germans, this common institution of these peoples (*gemeingermanische eine Institution*), they felt that there was not only no judiciary, but even more, claimed the absence of genuine rule of law. This lets us understand why the French left the task of explaining the epoch of the supposed “feudal order” inherited from their ancestors, the Franks, a period that they considered judicial “anarchy”, to their German colleagues.

Given this situation, French historiography concentrated on the epoch after the 13th century, the time when the legal institutions began to acquire a certain organisation at the ecclesiastic level, and also in the municipal field, together with the creation of the royal courts. In this historical setting, the progress that can be appreciated in the procedures used in the courts covered various aspects: improvements in the system of evidence, advances in the way the investigation was carried out and that changed from the accusatory procedure to the inquisitory, in the rise in the extraordinary processes based on secrecy and, frequently, the application of torture to avoid perjury and finally extract a confession. Lastly, editions of legal texts appeared in the 13th century accompanied by scholarly commentaries on customary law, and there was a spread of law commented on by jurists, in other words, wise law developed by experts.

It was therefore more worthy to enter the classic Middle Ages, the moment when law was said to have been born. This was the time when the judicial system was imposed on the social body, giving the judge a fundamental tool for judging, that is that his conviction would from then on be based on a rational investigation. Thus, three essential objectives were pursued in judicial procedures: establish the truth about the crime, determine its author and, lastly, apply the punishment he or she deserved in line with a valid code, all based on the judge’s conviction.

The historiographic paradigm that was imposed in the second half of the 19th century was as follows: the Germanic epoch, a moment when the humans were still morally close to the natural state and governed by instinct, was prolonged into the feudal society, characterised by the incapacity of objective law (the written laws) to overcome the preponderance of subjective (customary) law. From such a situation, it was deduced that during the Middle Ages there could be no legal order as such.

3. Enlightenment

The 18th century was favourable towards the Middle Ages. The dominant thought of this century was given the name of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, due to the rational spirit, represented by reason itself, being identified with the light or *les lumières*, as its representatives were known. Prior to the revolutionary outburst of 1789, France was the home of this rational environment, whose broad guidelines,



sometimes somewhat confusing, focussed on political and religious freedom as the bases for happiness understood civically.

It goes without saying that the Enlightenment was not free of prejudices. These were due to the posture adopted by the revolutionaries against the changes they drove, and that led to the revolt of 1789 with its legacy of blood and deep changes. For them, rejecting the changes implied many things in reality: accepting the monarchy as it was, recognising the Church and its omnipresent role in society, rejecting rational thought, recognising the hierarchy of the people, identifying them with the past, in other words, maintaining the reigning order and institutions.

On the contrary, accepting the changes implicitly meant strong criticism of a past that was identified with the monarchy and the Church. In other terms, the Middle Ages had to be rejected. In this line, light represented openness to criticism and rational thought, to knowing and understanding the world through reason, and because of this image, the past that clung to faith had to be identified with darkness. So, the enlightened philosophers called for the reforms by condemning the abuses that had been committed in the past, a past they analysed with a range of forceful statements in elegant French. In doing so, they frequently referred to the Middle Ages where they found information that corroborated their thought. A good part of medieval folklore, the image that is still held of this, as Jacques Heers states, was born this way, in the context of the preparation of the Revolution¹.

With all the prejudices highlighted above, and probably as a consequence of this same critical attitude, there is the other face of the Enlightenment. It proposed a different approach to the study of history by introducing two very important elements. Firstly, it was open to new approaches on various themes, and in second place, a critical method was used to interpret the facts previously reconstituted from strictly from the documentary sources. The so-called “scientific” history was then on the rise, and with it, the introduction of the idea of progress developed by Condorcet. They understood that the story of history was presented as a process of uninterrupted progress of humankind for the better. Here it seems we find the explanation for the dramatic criticism of the “medieval obscurantism”. When concerning themselves with feudalism as a powerful oppressive and unjust structure, the enlightened scholars evidently presented the Middle Ages as a regression from the classical epoch. The explanation that arose spontaneously for this kind of a regression of European civilisation was the presence of the religious factor that impeded the rational understanding of the universe. Here then, there is the Catholic Church and its control of consciences.

There is a frankly immense 18th-century literature, of varied value, that it is not possible to deal with here in full. However, I have chosen some representatives of enlightened thought (with the exception of Charles du Fresne Du Cange) who can be included in this anti-medieval current, and I quote those passages from their works that I find most representative.

1. Heers, Jack. *La invención de la Edad Media*. Madrid: Crítica, 1995: 115; Mayos, Gonçal. *La Il·lustració*. Barcelona: Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2006.



4. Charles du Fresne du Cange

Du Cange is not really one of the enlightened scholars, but should be considered a precedent of that current who began to study the past based on the documents and the careful establishment of the facts. However, I wish to include him here due to his outlook on the medieval past. Born in 1610, he died in 1688 and was a very erudite French intellectual who composed an impressive dictionary of medieval and modern Latin known as *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitas*², still an essential tool for medievalists when seeking to specify words and discover their semantic connections. In volume X, on commenting the history of the French king Saint Louis written by Jean de Joinville, he inserts a dissertation titled *Des Guerres privées et du droit de guerres par coutume* based on the then-unpublished chronicle by Philippe de Beaumanoir, which dedicated a chapter to these wars that were waged out of custom.

The author begins by emphasising that he mentions this detestable custom (détestable coùtume) given that it is universal in the history of France and other countries. The right to make and declare war was a very widespread social habit, that became a frequent practice among the vassals of these princes, and whose origin must be sought in the Germanic customs,

Ç'a esté un usage observé et reçu de tout temps parmi les nations germaniques, de tirer la vengeance des injures particulières par la voie des armes, et d'y intéresser toute une parenté³.

In some passages, the author expresses his very low opinion of this “detestable” custom, emphasising its primitivism of German roots,

L'on voit assez par ce que je viens de remarquer, que l'usage de la guerre par coùtume avoit esté non seulement en pratique sous nos premiers Gaulois, mais encore avoit esté retenu par les François, que leur succédèrent, et généralement par tous les peuples septentrionaux, qui avec le temps s'établirent si puissamment dans les provinces et les terres qu'ils conquièrent dans l'empire d'Occident, qu'on a eu bien de la peine à y donner atteinte, et à l'abolir entièrement. Cependant cette faculté de se faire ainsi la guerre est contraire au droit des gens, qui ne souffre pas qu'aucun autre ait le pouvoir de déclarer et se faire la guerre, que les princes et les souverains, qui ne reconnoissent personne au dessus d'eux. Qu'il est

2. Cange, Charles du Fresne du. *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitas*. Paris: Editions de Niort-Favre, 1883-1887: 10 vols. In 1668, the author republished the work of the chronicler Jean de Joinville, finished in 1307, adding some comments that were included in the *Glossarium* under the title of *Des guerres privées et du droit de guerre par coutume*, and that corresponded to the dissertation XXIX from volume X of the cited edition, p. 100-108. Quoting the sources, he first deals with who can make war and describes these (p. 100-103). He then goes on to mention the four ways of putting an end to these (p. 103-107).

3. “It was a custom always observed and accepted among the Germanic nations to take up arms to avenge individual wrongs and for a whole clan to become involved” (Cange, Charles du Fresne du. *Glossarium mediae...*: 100).



même entièrement opposé aux maximes chrétiennes, qui veulent qu'on laisse la vengeance des injures à Dieu seul, ou aux juges qui sont établis pour les punir⁴.

Moreover, at the end of his commentary, he purported to show that Saint Louis had attempted to limit the private wars (vendettas or blood feuds) that were still rooted in 13th-century French society due to its Germanic, in other words primitive, origins.

5. Montesquieu

Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède and of Montesquieu (1689-1755), was a multifaceted intellectual, better known for his theory of the separation of powers than for his contributions as a historian. His most important works contain historical references that interest us for this theme.

In 1734, Montesquieu wrote an outstanding, erudite and intellectually penetrating work that he titled *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*⁵, which contained such comparative interpretations as this,

L'histoire moderne nous fournit un exemple de ce qui arriva pour lors à Rome, et ceci est bien remarquable: car, comme les hommes ont eu dans tous les temps les mêmes passions, les occasions qui produisent les grands changements sont différentes, mais les causes sont toujours les memes⁶.

When he dealt with the decline of the Western Roman Empire, on referring to the War of the images, he slipped into a long anti-ecclesiastical reflection typical of the times about the excessive power that he believed churchmen had acquired,

Voici un étrange contradiction de l'esprit humain. Les ministres de la Religion chez les premiers Romains, n'étant pas exclu des charges et de la société civile, s'embarrassèrent peu de ses affaires. Lorsque la Religion chrétienne fut établie, les ecclésiastiques, qui étaient

4. "It is seen so much because, as I have just said, the custom of using war was a practice not only under our early Gauls, it was kept up by the Franks, who succeeded them, and generally by all northern peoples. In time it became so strongly established in the provinces and lands they conquered in the Western empire that it was very difficult to attack it and stamp it out. However, the ability to make war in this way is contrary to the rights of people who do not accept anyone other than princes and sovereigns, who recognise no one as being above them, having the power to declare and make war. It is also entirely opposed to Christian maxims, which would have revenge for wrongs left to God alone, or to judges set up to punish them" (Cange, Charles du Fresne du. *Glossarium mediae...*: 105).

5. Montesquieu, Charle Louis de Secondat. *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des romains et de leur décadence*, ed. Henri Barckhausen. Paris: Impression Nationale, 1900.

6. "Modern history furnishes us with an example of what happened at that time in Rome, and this is well worth noting. For the occasions which produce great changes are different, but, since men have had the same passions at all times, the causes are always the same" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Considérations sur les causes...*: 3).



plus séparés des affaires du monde, s'en mêlèrent avec modération. Mais, lorsque, dans la décadence de l'Empire, les moines furent le seul clergé, ces gens, destinés par une profession plus particulière à fuir et à craindre les affaires, embrassèrent toutes les occasions qui purent leur y donner part: ils ne cessèrent de faire du bruit partout et d'agiter ce monde qu'ils avaient quitté [...]. Aucune affaire d'État, aucune paix, aucune guerre, aucune trêve, aucune négociation, aucun mariage ne se traita que par le ministère des moines: les conseils du Prince en furent remplis, et les assemblées de la Nation, presque toutes composées [...]. On se saurait croire quel mal il en resulta: ils affaiblirent l'esprit des Princes et leur firent faire imprudemment même les choses bonnes. Pendant que Basile occupait les soldats de son armée de mer à bâtir une église à saint Michel, il laissa piller la Sicile par les Sarrasins et prendre Syracuse, et Léon, son successeur, qui employa sa flotte au même usage, leur laissa occuper Tauroménie et l'île de Lemnos⁷.

The reading that can be deduced from this is that, concerned with being acceptable to God through the influence of the monks, the Byzantine emperors neglected the political tasks they were obliged to fulfil. This was, we could say, the great setback that occurred during the Middle Ages, and meant the collapse of Byzantine society by not having placed limits on the excessive intromission of the ecclesiastic power. In fact, Montesquieu applied the modern criterion of the separation between State and Church to judge the evolution of Byzantine society, a criterion that the West has known for barely two centuries,

La source la plus empoisonnée de tous les malheurs des Grecs, c'est qu'ils ne connurent jamais la nature ni les bornes de la puissance ecclésiastique et de la séculière [...] cette grande distinction, qui est la base sur laquelle pose la tranquillité des peuples, est fondée non seulement sur la Religion, mais encore sur la raison et la nature, qui veulent que des choses réellement séparées, et qui ne peuvent subsister que séparées, ne soient jamais confondues⁸.

7. "Here now is a strange inconsistency of the human mind. The ministers of religion among the early Romans were not excluded from the burdens of evil society and hardly got involved in its affairs. When the Christian religion was established, the ecclesiastics, who were more removed from worldly affairs, concerned themselves with them to a moderate extent. But when, in the decline of the empire, the monks were the only clergy, these men —destined by more particular vows to flee and fear worldly affairs— seized every occasion to take part in them. They never stopped making a stir everywhere and agitating the world they had quitted. No affairs of state, no peace, no war, no truce, no negotiation, no marriage was arranged except through the monks. The prince's councils were full of them, and the nation's assemblies almost wholly composed of them. The evil this caused would pass belief. They enfeebled the mind of princes, and made them do even good things imprudently. While Basil employed the warriors of his navy in building a church to Saint Michael, he let the Saracens pillage Sicily and take Syracuse. And Leo, his successor, who employed his fleet for the same purpose, let them occupy Tauromenium and the island of Lemnos" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Considérations sur les causes...* 150).

8. "The most vicious source of all the misfortunes of the Greeks is that they never knew the nature or limits of ecclesiastical and secular power, and this made them fall, on both sides, into continual aberrations. This great distinction, which is the basis on which the tranquility of peoples rests, is founded not only on religion but also on reason and nature, which ordain that really separate things —things that can endure only by being separate— should never be confounded" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Considérations sur les causes...* 154).



Furthermore, tolerance, so dear to the enlightened, had been lost with the continuous teleological disputes. With the population submerged in exhausting and useless controversies, these would finally have weakened the imperial government. The moralistic tone of Montesquieu's commentary is very 18th century,

Dans les disputes ordinaires, comme chacun sent qu'il peut se tromper, l'opiniâtreté et l'obstination ne sont pas extrêmes. Mais, dans celles que nous avons sur la Religion, comme, par la nature de la chose, chacun croit être sûr que son opinion est vraie, nous nous indignons contre ceux qui, au lieu de changer eux-mêmes, s'obstinent à nous faire changer⁹.

In 1754, Montesquieu wrote the "Essay on Taste" where he analysed the concept of beauty and like ideas. When he refers to the pleasures of truth, he states that the soul requires a certain order and also a certain variety. In this context, to clarify these ideas, he takes an example that reveals his prejudice towards the Middle Ages and positive bias for Antiquity,

L'architecture gothique paraît très variée; mais la confusion des ornements fatigue par leur petitesse; ce qui fait qu'il n'y en a aucun que nous puissions distinguer d'un autre, et leur nombre fait qu'il n'y en a aucun, sur lequel l'œil puisse s'arrêter; de manière qu'elle déplaît par les endroits mêmes qu'on a choisis pour la rendre agréable [...]. Un bâtiment d'ordre gothique est une espèce d'énigme pour l'œil qui le voit; et l'âme est embarrassée comme quand on lui présente un poème obscur [...]. L'architecture grecque, au contraire, paraît uniforme; mais, comme elle a des divisions qu'il faut, et autant qu'il en faut pour que l'âme voie précisément ce qu'elle peut voir sans se fatiguer, mais qu'elle en voie assez pour s'occuper, elle a cette variété qui la fait regarder avec plaisir¹⁰.

Talking about contrasts, he states that the soul loves symmetry. He again compares medieval and Greek art,

Si la nature demande des peintres et des sculpteurs qu'ils mettent de la symétrie dans les parties de leurs figures, elle veut au contraire qu'ils mettent des contrastes dans les attitudes. Un pied rangé comme un autre, un membre qui va comme un autre, sont insupportables: la raison en est que cette symétrie fait que les attitudes sont presque toujours les mêmes, comme

9. "In ordinary disputes each person knows he can be wrong and hence is not extremely opinionated or obstinate. But in our disputes over religion, by the nature of the thing, each person is sure his opinion is true, and we are indignant with those who obstinately insist on making us change instead of changing themselves" Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Considérations sur les causes...* : 152.

10. "The Gothic architecture appears extremely varied, but the confusion of its ornaments fatigues us by their smallness; which makes it impossible for us to distinguish them from each other, and their number prevents the eye from fixing upon any one of them; so that it disgusts us by those very parts which were intended to render it agreeable. A building of the Gothic order is a kind of riddle to the eye which beholds it; and the mind is embarrassed in the same way as when an obscure poem is presented to it. The Grecian architecture, on the contrary, appears uniform, but as it has as many divisions as it ought, and as are proper to make the Mind see precisely as much as it can without being fatigued, and at the same time enough to give it employment, has that Variety which makes it be beheld with pleasure" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Essai sur le goût*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1993: 41-42).



*on le voit dans les figures gothiques, qui se ressemblent toutes par là. Ainsi il n'y a plus de variété dans les productions de l'art*¹¹.

As the variety he pursued in Gothic art gave it its uniformity, it was frequently sought at the expense of contrasts; it resulted in symmetry and a harsh uniformity. This was not only true in sculpture and painting, but also in the style of writing,

*dans chaque phrase, mettent toujours le commencement en contraste avec la fin par des antithèses continuelles, tels que saint Augustin et autres auteurs de la base latinité [...] lorsque vous avez vu une partie de la phrase, vous devinez toujours l'autre; vous voyez des mots opposés, mais opposés de la même manière; vous voyez un tour de phrase, mais c'est toujours le même*¹².

In his best-known work, "The Spirit of the Laws", published in 1748, Montesquieu concerns himself with the formation of France during the High Middle Ages with the arrival of the Germans, who he also calls barbarians, as opposed to the Romanised Gauls who then inhabited the country. He draws a portrait of them in the first chapters of the book XXX, especially in chapter XIX titled "Of Compositions among the Barbarous Nations".

Montesquieu states that before entering the Roman Empire, the Germans in general, and the Franks in particular, lived in that state of nature described by Tacitus, the moment prior to civilisation, and which they abandoned on entering Gaul with the establishment of laws in the times of the Merovingian monarchs¹³. The custom of avenging offences would have been introduced into the medieval West by the Germans, and in the particular case of Gaul, by the Franks. He states that, to limit this dangerous custom, the wise men of the various barbarian nations put a price on the damage caused, which would be paid by the offender. And the laws set this out very clearly, distinguishing the cases and the circumstances,

11. "if Nature requires of painters and sculptors to proportion the parts of their figures, it requires also that they contrast their different attitudes. One foot placed like another, one member extended like another, are insupportable; the reason of it is, because this symmetry makes the attitudes be almost always the same; which we may observe in Gothic figures, which by this almost always resemble each other; thus there is no more variety in the works of Art. Besides, Nature has not made us thus, and, as she has given us motion, she has not formed us in our actions and manners like pagods; and if men thus stiff and constrained are intolerable, what must it be in the productions of art" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Essai sur le goût*...: 45).

12. "in every phrase, contrast the beginning with the end by perpetual antitheses; such as St. Augustine and other authors of the low Latin [...] when you have seen one part of the phrase, you guess at the other: you see words opposed to each other, but opposed always in the same manner: you see a turn of phrase, but it is always the same" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *Essai sur le goût*... : 46).

13. *Ce fut par l'établissement de ces lois que les peuples germains sortirent de cet état de nature où il semble qu'ils étoient encore du temps de Tacite* (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. "L'esprit des lois", *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*. Paris: Pierre Pourrat, 1834: 494).



*la loi se met à la place de celui que est offensé, et demande pour lui la satisfaction que dans un moment de sang-froid il aurait demandée lui*¹⁴.

The provisions converted German law into a legal status designed to protect the criminal from the acts of vengeance that could be contemplated by the victim or his family,

*Chez les nations violentes, rendre la justice n'étoit autre chose qu'accorder à celui qu'avoit fait une offense sa protection contre la vengeance de celui qui l'avoit reçue, et obliger ce dernier à recevoir la satisfaction qui lui étoit due; de sorte que, chez le Germains, à la différence de tous les autres peuples, la justice se rendoit pour protéger le criminel contre celui qu'il avoit offensé*¹⁵.

Lastly, we can try to summarise his argumentation in the following way: in primitive times, individual revenge between Germans was a common right. However, the legislator did not take long to recognise the danger that these private wars, that converted the country into the battlefield on a daily basis, implied for society. Thus, a pecuniary rate was promulgated, with great thoroughness and precaution, for all the combinations of these offences, from the smallest insult to the most heinous crime. This way, the wise decision was taken that the only right of the offended would be to require the courts to award payment of the compensation set by the law. This led to society intervening in criminal trials in a very different way than under modern legislation. While under the latter, society acts against the guilty, the repentant as well as he who is willing to repair the damage caused at the highest price, in contrast, the Franks contained the victim's anger by channelling his right to demand the compensation established by the law through the courts. However, if he wanted to take revenge through direct acts, he would be considered culpable and a disturbance.

6. Jean Le Rond d'Alembert

In the mid 18th century, together with Denis Diderot, this French sage prepared the publication of the impressive *Encyclopedie* as an authentic *dictionnaire raisonné des sciences et des artes*. D'Alambert (1717-1783) was responsible for presenting the

14. "the law substitutes itself in the place of the person injured, and insists upon the same satisfaction as he himself would have demanded in cold blood" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. "L'esprit des lois...": 494).

15. "The administration of justice among those rude and unpolished nations was nothing more than granting to the person who had committed an offence a protection against the vengeance of the party offended, and obliging the latter to accept of the satisfaction due to him: insomuch that among the Germans, contrary to the practice of all other nations, justice was administered in order to protect the criminal against the party injured" (Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. "L'esprit des lois...": chapter XX: 498).



famous preliminary discourse where he placed great stress on defining clearly what the editors of this monumental work proposed.

D'Alembert wished to show the state of the sciences and arts, especially philosophy, which was the science called on to create significant changes to the extent that it could deviate from the retrograde influences of the scholastic. Over many centuries, he claims, the human spirit has been buried by the shadow of the so-called "authorities", referring to the great medieval Christian authors, who were not to be questioned. In such an environment, the ancient knowledge remained hidden for twelve centuries,

Les chefs-d'œuvre que les anciens nous avaient laissés dans presque tous les genres, avaient été oubliés pendant douze siècles. Les principes des sciences et des arts étaient perdus, parce que le beau et le vrai qui semblent se montrer de toutes parts aux hommes, ne les frappent guère à moins qu'ils n'en soient avertis. Ce n'est pas que ces temps malheureux aient été stériles que d'autres en génies rares; la nature est toujours la même; mais que pouvaient faire ces grands hommes, semés de loin à loin comme ils le sont toujours, occupés d'objets différends, et abandonnés sans culture à leurs seules lumières? Les idées qu'on acquiert par la lecture et par la société, sont le germe de presque toutes les découvertes. C'est un air que l'on respire sans y penser, et auquel on doit la vie; et les hommes [...] dont nous parlons étaient privés d'un tel secours. Ils ressemblaient aux premiers créateurs des sciences et des arts, que leurs illustres successeurs ont fait oublier, et qui, précédés par ceux-ci, les auraient fait oublier de même. Celui qui trouva le premier les roués et les pignons, eût inventé les montres dans un autre siècle, et Gerbert placé au temps d'Archimède l'aurait peut-être égalé¹⁶.

After the end of Antiquity, Europe fell into a long stage of backwardness, in which bad taste and vulgarity affected culture and intellectuality. The image deserves to be taken into consideration in this historiographic examination,

Cependant la plupart des beaux esprits de ces temps ténébreux se faisaient appeler poètes ou philosophes. Que leur en coûtait-il en effet pour usurper deux titres dont on se pare à si peu de frais, et qu'on se flatte toujours de ne guère devoir à des lumières empruntées? Ils croyaient qu'il était inutile de chercher les modèles de la poésie dans les ouvrages des Grecs et des Romains, dont la langue ne se parlait plus; et ils prenaient pour la véritable philosophie des anciens une tradition barbare qui la défigurait. La poésie se réduisait pour eux à un mécanisme puéril: l'examen approfondi de la nature, et la grande étude de l'homme, étaient

16. "The masterpieces that the ancients left us in almost all genres were forgotten for twelve centuries. The principles of the sciences and the arts were lost, because the beautiful and the true, which seem to show themselves everywhere to men, are hardly noticed unless men are already apprised of them. Not that these unfortunate times were less fertile than others in rare geniuses; Nature is always the same. But what could these great men do, scattered as they always are, from place to place, occupied with different purposes, and left to their solitary enlightenment with no cultivation of their abilities? Ideas which are acquired from reading and from association with others are the germ of almost all discoveries. It is like the air one breathes without thinking about it, to which one owes life; and the men of whom we are speaking were deprived of such sustenance. They were like the first creators of the sciences and the arts who have been forgotten because of their illustrious successors, and who, had they but come later, would themselves have caused the memory of the others to fade. The man who first discovered wheels and pinions would have invented watches in another century. Gerbert, situated in the time of Archimedes, would perhaps have equaled him" (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie", *Oeuvres complètes de d'Alembert*. Paris: E.A. Lequien, 1821 : I, first part, 54).



remplacés par mille questions frivoles sur des être abstraits et métaphysiques; questions dont la solution, bonne ou mauvaise, demandait souvent beaucoup de subtilité, et par conséquent un grand abus de l'esprit. Qu'on joigne à ce désordre l'état d'esclavage où presque toute l'Europe était plongée, les ravages de la superstition qui naît de l'ignorance, et que la reproduit à son tour, et on verra que rien ne manquait aux obstacles qui éloignaient le retour de la raison et du goût; car il n'y a que la liberté d'agir et de penser qui soit capable de produire des grandes choses, et elle n'a besoin que des lumières pour se préserver des excès. [...] Aussi fallut-il au genre humain, pour sortir de la barbarie, une de ces révolutions qui font prendre à la terre une face nouvelle: l'Empire grec est détruit, sa ruine fait refluer en Europe le peu de connaissances qui restaient encore au monde: l'invention de l'imprimerie, la protection des Médicis et de François I^{er}, raniment les esprits; et la lumière renaît de toutes parts. [...] L'étude des langues et de l'histoire abandonnée par nécessité durant les siècles d'ignorance, fut la première à laquelle on se libéra. L'esprit humain se trouvait, au sortir de la barbarie, dans une espèce d'enfance, avide d'accumuler des idées, et incapable pourtant d'en acquérir d'abord d'un certain ordre par l'espèce d'engourdissement où les facultés de l'âme avaient été si longtemps¹⁷.

It will have been noted how wide the range of disqualifying epithets for the medieval past grows (dark, barbaric, frivolity, disorder, slavery, superstition, ignorance, numbness) in one short paragraph. D'Alambert shows himself to be a worthy representative of enlightened thought.

When he refers to the renaissance of painting and sculpture, he indicates that the reason for this rebirth lies in the masters having escaped from superstition and barbarity,

La scholastique qui composait toute la science prétendue des siècles d'ignorance, nuisait encore aux progrès de la vraie philosophie dans ce premier siècle de lumière. On était persuadé depuis un temps, pour ainsi dire, immémorial, qu'on possédait dans toute sa pureté la doctrine d'Aristote, commentée par les Arabes, et altérée par mille additions absurdes ou

17. "Most of the superior intelligences of those dark times called themselves poets or philosophers. And indeed what did it cost them to usurp two titles with which people bedeck themselves at so little expense, ever flattering themselves that they can hardly owe them to borrowed wit? They thought it useless to seek models for poetry in the works of the Greeks and the Romans, whose language was no longer spoken; and they mistook for the true philosophy of the ancients a barbarous tradition which disfigured it. Poetry for them was reduced to a puerile mechanism. The careful examination of Nature and the grand study of mankind were replaced by a thousand frivolous questions concerning abstract and metaphysical beings— questions whose solution, good or bad, often required much subtlety, and consequently a great abuse of intelligence. Added to this confusion were the condition of slavery into which almost all of Europe was plunged and the ravages of superstition which is born of ignorance and which spawns it in turn. If one considers all these difficulties it will be plain that nothing was lacking to the obstacles that for a long time delayed the return of reason and taste. For liberty of action and thought alone is capable of producing great things, and liberty requires only enlightenment to preserve itself from excess. [...] And so one of those revolutions which make the world take on a new appearance was necessary to enable the human species to emerge from barbarism. The Greek [Byzantine] empire was destroyed, and its ruin caused the small remainder of knowledge in the world to flow back into Europe. The invention of printing and the patronage of the Medici and of Francis I revitalized minds, and enlightenment was reborn everywhere. [...] People turned first to the study of languages and history, which had perforce been abandoned during the centuries of ignorance. On emerging from barbarism, the human mind found itself in a sort of infancy. It was eager to accumulate ideas, but incapable at first of acquiring those of a higher order because of the kind of sluggishness in which the faculties of the soul had for so long a time been sunk" (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 57).



*puériles; et on ne pensait pas même à s'assurer si cette philosophie barbare était réellement celle de ce grand homme, tant on avait conçu de respect pour les anciens*¹⁸.

There is an outstanding passage in which he takes exception to the dogmatism and intolerance that was still appreciated in his times. It is well worth presenting it, because it reveals that d'Alembert, like many other enlightened "philosophers", were not atheists, but rather that they were against, often virulently so, the attempts by the Church to contain the use of reason in the scientific explanations of the material world,

quelque absurde qu'une religion puisse être (reproche que l'impiété seule peut faire à la nôtre), ce ne sont jamais les philosophes qui la détruisent: lors même qu'ils enseignent la vérité, ils se contentent de la montrer sans forcer personne à la connaître; un tel pouvoir n'appartient qu'à l'Être tout-puissant: ce sont les hommes inspirés qui éclairent le peuple, et les enthousiastes de ces derniers qui l'égarent. Le frein qu'on est obligé de mettre à la licence de ces philosophes, et dont la religion peut tirer les plus grands avantages. Si le christianisme ajoute à la philosophie les lumières qui lui manquent, s'il n'appartient qu'à la grâce de soumettre les incrédules, c'est à la philosophie qu'il est réservé de les réduire au silence; et pour assurer le triomphe de la foi, les théologiens dont nous parlons n'avaient qu'à faire usage des armes qu'on aurait voulu employer contre elle [...]. Mais parmi ces mêmes hommes, quelques uns avaient un intérêt beaucoup plus réel de s'opposer à l'avancement de la philosophie. Faussement persuadés que la croyance des peuples est d'autant plus ferme, qu'on l'exerce sur plus d'objets différents, ils ne se contentaient pas d'exiger pour nos mystères la soumission qu'ils méritent, ils cherchaient à ériger en dogmes leurs opinions particulières; et c'étaient ces opinions mêmes, bien plus que les dogmes, qu'ils voulaient mettre en sûreté. Par là ils auraient porté à la religion le coup le plus terrible, si elle eût été l'ouvrage des hommes; car il était à craindre que leurs opinions étant une fois reconnues pour fausses, le peuple qui ne discerne rien, ne traitât de la même manière les vérités avec lesquelles on avait voulu les confondre [...]. D'autres théologiens de meilleure foi, mais aussi dangereux, se joignaient à ces premiers par d'autres motifs. Quoique la religion soit uniquement destinée à régler nos mœurs et notre foi, ils la croyaient faite pour nous éclairer aussi sur le système du monde, c'est-à-dire, sur ces matières que le Tout-Puissant a expressément abandonnées à nos disputes. Ils ne faisaient pas réflexion que les livres sacrés et les ouvrages des Pères, faits pour montrer au peuple comme aux philosophes ce qu'il faut pratiquer et croire, ne devaient point sur les questions indifférentes parler un autre langage que le peuple. Cependant le despotisme théologique ou le préjugé l'emporta. Un tribunal devenu puissant dans le midi de l'Europe, dans les Indes, dans le Nouveau-Monde, mais que la foi n'ordonne point de croire, ni la charité d'approuver, ou plutôt que la religion réprouve quoiqu'occupé par ses ministres, et dont la France n'a pu s'accoutumer encore à prononcer le nom sans effroi, condamna un célèbre astronome pour avoir soutenu le mouvement de la terre, et le déclara hérétique; à peu près comme le pape Zacharie avait condamné quelques siècles auparavant un évêque, pour n'avoir pas pensé comme S. Augustin sur les antipodes, et pour avoir deviné leur existence six cents ans avant que Christophe Colomb les découvrit. C'est ainsi que l'abus de l'autorité

18. "Scholasticism, which constitutes the whole of so-called science of the centuries of ignorance, still was prejudicial to the progress of true philosophy in that first century of enlightenment. Since time immemorial, so to speak, men had been persuaded that they possessed the doctrine of Aristotle in all its purity, [even though it had been] commented on by the Arabs and corrupted by thousands of absurd or childish additions. So great was their respect for the ancients that they did not even think of ascertaining whether that barbarous philosophy was really the philosophy of this great man" (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 61).



*spirituelle réunie à la temporelle forçait la raison au silence; et peu s'en fallut qu'on ne défendît au genre humain de penser*¹⁹.

In fact, he was referring to the abuse, that should be interpreted as “medieval” extended to modern times, that the spiritual authority exercised over the temporal power. Without the support, or collusion, of the latter, it would not have been possible to control the consciences to the point of silencing the opinions. In this anticlericalism, the image of the Medioevo invaded by the Church gradually decayed.

D’Alembert dedicated eulogistic comments to Francis Bacon, who he considered *le plus grand, le plus universel et le plus éloquent* (“the greatest, the most universal and the most eloquent”) of the philosophers. The most outstanding of this intellectual is that he became so having been born into the darkest night, in other words, at the end of the 16th century which, for d’Alembert, still meant the Middle Ages, the epoch in which philosophy still did not exist and everything had to be begun, although there were those who boasted of mastering it²⁰.

19. “[...] however absurd a religion might be (a reproach which only impiety can make of ours), it is never the philosophers who destroy it. Even when they teach truth, they are satisfied to demonstrate it without forcing recognition from anyone. Such a power belongs only to the Omnipotent Being. It is the inspired men who enlighten the people and the enthusiasts who lead them astray. The bridle that we are obliged to impose upon the license of the latter should in no way harm that liberty which is so necessary to true philosophy and from which religion can draw the greatest advantages. If Christianity brings to philosophy the enlightenment that it lacks and if grace alone can force the incredulous to submit, it is reserved for philosophy to reduce them to silence. To assure the triumph of faith, the theologians of whom we speak needed only to employ those weapons which were supposed to constitute a threat to it. But some among these men had much more compelling reasons to oppose the advance of philosophy. Falsely persuaded that the faith of peoples becomes firmer as the different objects upon which it is exercised become more numerous, they were not content to require a legitimate submission to our mysteries. They tried to elevate their individual opinions into dogmas. And it was these opinions themselves, far more than the dogmas, which they wanted to make secure. They would by this means have inflicted the most terrible blow upon religion, had religion been the work of men. For there was a danger that once these opinions were recognized as false, the common people (who have no discernment) might treat the truths of religion and the false opinions with which some had wished to confound them in the same way. Other theologians who were of better faith, but equally dangerous, joined with the first for different motives. Although religion is intended uniquely to regulate our mode of life and our faith, they believed it was to enlighten us also on the system of the world—in short, on matters which the All-Powerful has expressly left to our own disputations. They did not make the reflection that the sacred books and the works of the Fathers, which were created to teach the common people as well as the philosophers the requirements of practice and belief, would have spoken only the language of the common people when it came to indifferent questions. However, theological despotism or prejudice won out. A tribunal whose name still cannot be spoken without fear in France became powerful in the south of Europe, in the Indies, and the New World. Faith in no way ordained belief in it, nor charity the approval of it. It condemned a celebrated astronomer for having maintained that the earth moved and declared him a heretic, almost in the way that Pope Zachary had, some centuries before, condemned a bishop for not having thought as St. Augustine did concerning the antipodes, and for having guessed their existence six hundred years before Christopher Columbus discovered them. It was thus that the abuse of the spiritual authority, conjoined with the temporal, forced reason to silence; and they were not far from forbidding the human race to think” (Alembert, Jean le Rond d’. “Discours préliminaire...”: 62-63).

20. [...] *on serait tenté de le regarder comme le plus grand, le plus universel, et le plus éloquent des philosophes. Bacon, né dans le sein de la nuit la plus profonde, sentit que la philosophie n'était pas encore, quoique bien des gens*



When he talks about Descartes, he draws grand eulogies, especially because he had to face barbarity. As has been noted, the dialectic barbarity-civilisation dominates the text,

*Descartes a osé du moins montrer aux bons esprits à secouer le joug de la scholastique, de l'opinion, de l'autorité, en un mot, des préjugés et de la barbarie; et par cette révolte dont nous recueillons aujourd'hui les fruits, il a rendu à la philosophie un service plus essentiel peut-être que tous ceux qu'elle doit à ses illustres successeurs. On peut le regarder comme un chef de conjurés qui a eu le courage de s'élever le premier contre une puissance despotique et arbitraire, et qui, en préparant une révolution éclatante, a jeté les fondements d'un gouvernement plus juste et plus heureux qu'il n'a pu voir établi. S'il a fini par croire tout expliquer, il y a du moins commencé par douter de tout*²¹.

It is said that the genius of Descartes is to have found a new route in the darkest night: génie qu'il a montré en cherchant dans la nuit la plus sombre une route nouvelle²². As in many places in the text, night is represented by the scholastic, which is the manifestation of the rule of a sectarian and intolerant Church. In contrast, the light (lumière) represents the rule of reason, human intelligence, the capacity to understand the world and things, human understanding,

*La philosophie, qui forme le gout dominant de notre siècle, semble, par les progrès qu'elle fait parmi nous, vouloir réparer le temps qu'elle a perdu, et se venger de l'espèce de mépris que lui avaient marqué nos pères*²³.

He reiterates that philosophy had been reborn after coming out of this "long interval of ignorance" precisely because reason had come to enlighten it. Clearly, the Middle Ages were darkness,

*L'obscurité se terminera par un nouveau siècle de lumière. Nous serons plus frappés du grand jour après avoir été quelque temps dans les ténèbres. Elles seront comme une espèce d'anarchie très-funeste par elle-même, mais quelques fois utile par ses suites*²⁴.

sans doute se flattassent d'y exceller; car plus un siècle est grossier, plus il se croit instruit de tout ce qu'il peut savoir (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 63).

21. "Descartes dared at least to show intelligent minds how to throw off the yoke of scholasticism, of opinion, of authority—in a word, of prejudices and barbarism. And by that revolt whose fruits we are reaping today, he rendered a service to philosophy perhaps more difficult to perform than all those contributed thereafter by his illustrious successors. He can be thought of as a leader of conspirators who, before anyone else, had the courage to arise against a despotic and arbitrary power and who, in preparing a resounding revolution, laid the foundations of a more just and happier government, which he himself was not able to see established. If he concluded by believing he could explain everything, he at least began by doubting everything" (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 67).

22. Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 74.

23. "[...] philosophy, which constitutes the dominant taste of our century, seems to be trying to make up for the time that it has lost and to avenge itself for the sort of contempt our fathers showed for it" (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. "Discours préliminaire...": 75).

24. "The darkness will end with a new century of light. We will be struck by the great day after some time in the darkness. For everything has regular revolutions, and the darkness will be like a sort of anarchy,



However, the Middle Ages was also the period of irrationality and bad taste, as can be deduced comparing what d'Alembert presents here and in other places,

*Gardons-nous pourtant de souhaiter une révolution si redoutable; la barbarie dure des siècles, il semble que ce soit notre élément: la raison et le bon goût ne font que passer*²⁵.

7. Voltaire

François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), better known as Voltaire, was a man of his times, anticlerical and free-thinker, of bold, very subtle, word. The 18th-century intellectuals, who presented themselves as “philosophers”, identified the Middle Ages with Christianity and the rule of the Church. Within the word “religion”, they enclosed a series of more or less heterogeneous practices, considered irrational, among which they included divinations, certain incantations, abandoning suspects at sea and various corporal punishments. They lavished all the qualifiers without reserve against what they said were cruel and irrational customs.

Voltaire took a stance against these violent centuries of the Medievo in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des Nations*, written in 1756, where he held that murders committed by princes went unpunished by the Church,

*La religion chrétienne, qui devait humaniser les hommes, n'empêche point le roi Clovis de faire assassiner les petits régas, ses voisins et ses parents. Les deux enfants de Clodomir sont massacrés dans Paris, en 533, par un Childebert et un Clotaire, ses oncles, qu'on appelle rois de France; et Clodoald, le frère de ces innocents égorgés, est invoqué sous le nom de saint Cloud, parce qu'on l'a fait moine... Le père fait brûler son fils avec tous ses amis prisonniers, en 559*²⁶.

The passage is bleak, and the depiction of an epoch that could not be repeated,

Sous un Chilpéric, roi de Soissons, en 562, les sujets esclaves désertent ce prétendu royaume, lassés de la tyrannie de leur maître, qui prenait leur pain et leur vin, ne pouvant prendre

which is most baleful in itself, but sometimes useful in its consequences” (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. “Discours préliminaire...”: 81-82).

25. “let us not hope for such a fearful upset. Barbarism lasts for centuries; it seems that it is our natural element; reason and good taste are only passing” (Alembert, Jean le Rond d'. “Discours préliminaire...”: 82).

26. “The Christian religion, which should humanize men, did not hinder the King Clovis from causing the little kings his neighbours to be assassinated. Clodomir's two sons were murdered at Paris in 533 by their uncles Childebert and Clotaire, who are called kings of France; and Clodoaldo, brother of those slaughtered innocents, is invoked as a saint by the name of St. Cloud, because he was made a monk [...]. The father burned his son with all his prisoners friends, in 559” (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. “Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations”, *Œuvres Complètes*. Paris: Garnier, 1878, chapter XXII: “usages du temps de Charlemagne. De la justice, des lois. Coutumes singulières. Épreuves”).



l'argent qu'ils n'avaient pas. Un Sigebert, un autre Chilpéric, sont assassinés. Brunehaut, d'arienne devenue catholique, est accusée de mille meurtres; et un Clotaire II, non moins barbare qu'elle, la fait traîner, dit-on, à la queue d'un cheval dans son camp, et la fait mourir par ce nouveau genre de supplice, en 616. Si cette aventure n'est pas vraie, il est du moins prouvé qu'elle a été crue comme une chose ordinaire, et cette opinion même atteste la barbarie du temps. Il ne reste de monuments de ces âges affreux que des fondations de monastères, et un confus souvenir de misère et de brigandages. Figurez-vous des déserts où les loups, les tigres, et les renards, égorgent un bétail épars et timide: c'est le portrait de l'Europe pendant tant de siècles²⁷.

It is impossible to avoid citing the impressive portrait that Voltaire paints of medieval barbarity, the cover of Europe for so many centuries, the Middle Ages. The power of the Frankish stewards was founded on the use they made with the great men of the Church, the bishops and abbots, a kind of culpable solidarity,

Mais quand les majordomes ou maires de cette milice usurpèrent insensiblement le pouvoir, ils voulurent cimenter leur autorité par le crédit des prélats et des abbés, en les appelant aux assemblées du champ de mai²⁸.

When he describes the customs of the Germans, referring particularly to the Saxons, he attacks the prejudice of the intrinsic barbarity found especially in the religion,

Les Germains septentrionaux étaient alors appelés Saxons. On connaissait sous ce nom tous les peuples qui habitaient les bords du Vésèr et ceux de l'Elbe, de Hambourg à la Moravie, et du bas Rhin à la mer Baltique. Ils étaient païens ainsi que tout le septentrion. Leurs mœurs et leurs lois étaient les mêmes que du temps des Romains. Chaque canton se gouvernait en république, mais ils élisaient un chef pour la guerre. Leurs lois étaient simples comme leurs mœurs, leur religion grossière: ils sacrifiaient, dans les grands dangers, des hommes à la Divinité, ainsi que tant d'autres nations; car c'est le caractère des barbares de croire la Divinité malfaisante: les hommes font Dieu à leur image²⁹.

27. "Under Chilperic king of Soissons in 562, the subjects were so enslaved, that they deserted that pretended kingdom, tired of the tyranny of their master, who took their bread and wine, but could not take their money, for they had none. Sigebert and another Chilperic were assassinated. Brunehaut after quitting the Arian sect to embrace the catholic religion, was accused of a thousand murders; and Clotharius II, one as barbarous as herself, ordered her to be dragged after a horse's tail to his camp, till she expired under this new kind of punishment in 616. If this adventure is not true, it is at least proved that it was believed to be a regular thing, and the same opinion attests to the barbarism of the time. We have no monuments of those horrifying times except the foundation of a few monasteries, and a confused account of misery and depredations. Imagine deserts where wolves, tigers and foxes, slaughtering sparse and shy cattle: the portrait of Europe for so many centuries" (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. "Essai sur les mœurs...": chapter XVII).

28. "But when the stewards or mayors of the militia gradually usurped power, they wanted to cement their authority with the credit of prelates and abbots, calling on them in the assemblies of the field in May" (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. "Essai sur les mœurs...": chapter XVII).

29. "The northern Germans were then called Saxons. A name given to all the people who dwelt on the banks of the Weser and the Elbe from Hamburg to Moravia and from Mentz to the Baltic Sea. They, as well as all the North, were pagans: their manners and laws were the same as in the times of the ancient Roman. Each canton was a republic, but they elected a chief when they went to war. Their laws were simple as well as their manners, their religion was absurd: in times of imminent danger, they, like many



The Church is always depicted as being responsible through having being complicit in the barbarity,

L'Église a mis au nombre des saints cet homme qui répandit tant de sang, qui dépouilla ses neveux, et qui fut soupçonné d'inceste! [...]. La rouille de la barbarie était trop forte, et les âges suivants l'épaissirent encore³⁰.

The popular custom of wergeld or the price placed on each person in society constituted a cultural regression, because it left the rich and landowners unpunished: its jurisprudence, that seemed humane, was crueller than ours, because anyone who could was pay free to offend³¹. And it seems that it must have been so, for the Franks differed from the Gauls.

Regarding the so-called “God’s trials”, or trial by ordeal, these were seen as *déplorables folies de ce gouvernement barbare*, referring to Charlemagne, understanding as such, especially, the judicial duel, but also including other tests, including boiling water and the red-hot iron. Speaking for his times and adherents, Voltaire excluded any possibility of understanding these practices in his particular experience, stripping them of any supernatural cloak that made them understandable to the popular conscience. Undoubtedly, by excluding any divine intervention or “miracle”, everything related to these deep-rooted customs obviously seems absurd and barbarous, and in passing, as Dominique Barthélemy states, depicts 9th-century men as imbeciles³².

Voltaire had a distorting parameter for appreciating the past: distinguishing between civilisation and barbarity in human experience. This implacable dichotomy necessarily led to a split between passion and reason. With this, part of the history of man was thrown into irrationality as Blandine Barret-Kriegel has highlighted, quoting a passage in her *Remarques sur l'Histoire* transcribed below,

Me parece que si quisiéramos sacar provecho del tiempo presente, no nos pasaríamos la vida ensalzando las fábulas antiguas. Aconsejaría a un joven que adquiriera unas ligeras nociones de aquellos tiempos pasados, pero me gustaría que comenzase un estudio serio de la historia del tiempo en que ésta se vuelve verdaderamente interesante para nosotros: creo que este momento se puede situar a finales del siglo XV [a continuación justifica ofreciendo datos sobre procesos de comienzos del mundo moderno, y concluye]. Esta es la historia que todo el

other nations, sacrificed human victims to the Deity: it is the character of Barbarians, that they represent the Deity as a stern malevolent being; for man make God after their own image” (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. “Essai sur les mœurs...”: chapter XV).

30. “The Church has given the name of saint to that man who spilled so much blood, which stripped his nephews, who was suspected of incest! [...]. The blight of barbarism was too strong, and the following ages thickened yet more” (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. “Essai sur les mœurs...”: chapter XVI).

31. *Leur jurisprudence, qui paraît humaine, était peut-être en effet plus cruelle que la nôtre: elle laissait la liberté de mal faire à quiconque pouvait la payer* (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. “Essai sur les mœurs...”: chapter XXII).

32. Barthélemy, Dominique. *L'an mil et la paix de Dieu. La France chrétienne et féodale 980-1060*. Paris: Fayard, 1999. I use the Spanish edition: *El año mil y la paz de Dios. La Iglesia y la sociedad feudal*. Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2005: 660.



*mundo debe saber. Es en ella donde no encontrará ni predicciones quiméricas, ni oráculos mentirosos, ni falsos milagros, ni fábulas insensatas: todo allí es verdadero*³³.

Thus, the Enlightenment proclaimed the triumph of the bourgeoisie, conceiving progress as the result of overcoming anarchy and stagnation. The foundations of the rationalist project of the new contemporary society established in the 18th century became an obstacle for the historian, making it impossible to understand the medieval society that, it must be repeated, had ignored these principles.

However, contrary to what the Catholic historiography sought from it, Voltaire worked seriously using the best methods available in his time, making an effort of synthesis, as demonstrated by Ludovico Gatto³⁴; and it is no less worthy to remember him for having taken an important step towards the rational understanding of the past, a master of modern history according to Georges Lefebvre³⁵.

8. Conclusion

I believe that I have shown that the negative view of the Middle Ages, taking the existence of a right to vengeance as a starting point, was reinforced at the end of the modern world due to contamination from Enlightenment ideas on the appreciation of medieval past. Cloaked in revolutionary ideals, the French Enlightenment saw the medieval society plunged into a “natural state”, the result of the introduction of the Germanic traditions into Western Europe and the influence that the Church and Christianity had on that society.

Immersed in an environment of strong rationalism, pre-revolutionary France orientated its expectations towards political and religious freedom as the bases for happiness. To do this, it was necessary to leave behind the long monarchical and religious past, which was in reality medieval. With such a set of ideas, it was predictable that the Enlightenment would not be free of prejudices. These were due to the posture adopted by the revolutionaries towards the changes that led to the outbreak of 1789. For them, rejecting change actually meant many things:

33. “I think if we take advantage of this time, we would not spend our lives extolling the ancient fables. I would advise a young man to acquire a smattering of those times past, but I’d like him to begin the serious study of history at the time when it becomes really interesting for us: I think this time can be placed at the end of the 15th century [then he justifies offering data on processes of early modern world, and concludes]. This is the story that everyone should know. It is where you will find no chimerical predictions, lying oracles, false miracles, or foolish fables: everything there is true (Voltaire, François Marie Arouet. “Remarques sur l’Histoire”, *Œuvres Complètes*. Paris: Garnier, 1878: XVI, 137; Barret-Kriegel, Blandine. *Les historiens et la Monarchie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988: II, 294-306; Guerreau, Alain. *El futuro de un Pasado. La Edad Media en el siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2002: 28.

34. Gatto, Ludovico. *Medioevo voltairiano*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1972.

35. *Maître de l’histoire rationaliste, à nos yeux le fondateur de l’histoire vraiment moderne* (“Master of rationalist history, four our eyes the founder of the really modern history”). Lefebvre, Georges. *La naissance de l’historiographie moderne*. Paris: Flammarion, 1971: 125.



accepting the monarchy as it was, recognising the Church and its omnipresent role in society, rejecting rational thought, recognising the hierarchy of the people, identifying themselves with the past, in other words, maintaining the prevailing order and institutions.

9. Bibliographical appendix

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