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Introduction

Anyone looking for a literary image to sum up the Middle Ages would find it hard to beat Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the 1390s. The poet describes a motley group of characters making a pilgrimage from the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, to Canterbury, each one telling an entertaining story along the way. Among them is a knight who has fought in crusades in north Africa, Spain and eastern Europe. He is accompanied by his son, a squire, adept at jousting, and a longbow-carrying servant. Also travelling in the same company are a prioress, a nun, a friar, a monk, five other priests, a merchant, a scholar from Oxford University, a sergeant-at-law, a ship's captain, a doctor of physic, a five-times married businesswoman from Bath, a reeve, a miller, a seller of pardons, a summoner who instructed people to appear in court, a manciple or provisioner for one of the Inns of Court in London, three farmers, a cook, an innkeeper, five other tradesmen and Chaucer himself. We travel with them as they ride along to the shrine of St Thomas Becket, chatting, bickering and making each other laugh – an epitome of medieval England.

We tend to forget, however, just how fleeting Chaucer's world was. We often talk about 'the Middle Ages' as if the whole period was relatively unchanging, with a fixed set of characteristics. Within 200 years, however, life had profoundly changed. Many of Chaucer's characters were antiquated. The medieval knight was an anachronism. So too was jousting. Longbows had been replaced by guns. No one went on pilgrimage in England any more. There were no prioresses or nuns here. Nor were there any monks, friars or pardoners. Priests were no longer Roman Catholic. For Elizabethans, Chaucer would have provided a rare insight into a long-forgotten world, much as Jane Austen does for us today.

Chaucer's medieval cavalcade is equally unrepresentative of Norman England. This becomes clear when we contrast *The Canterbury*

Tales with the entries in Domesday Book, the famous survey of all the property in the country compiled in 1086. There were far fewer monks and nuns in the eleventh century compared with Chaucer's time. There were fewer merchants and ships' captains too. There were no friars at all. Nor were there any pardoners, summoners or doctors of physic. There were no Oxford scholars because Oxford University did not exist; neither did the Inns of Court. Nor were there any crusades or tournaments. There were no longbows. Not many people went on pilgrimage and the few who did were serious souls who set a higher priority on seeing Jerusalem or Rome than Canterbury. Most people were agricultural workers – ploughmen, herdsmen, swineherds, dairymaids and beekeepers – and most of them were not at liberty to leave the place where they grew up. They wouldn't have been allowed to join Chaucer on his pilgrimage.

This should leave us wondering what we really mean when we use the term 'medieval'. What exactly are we referring to when that word relates to such different societies? As the comparisons just mentioned indicate, there were many Middle Ages, not just one. To describe them all in the same way is like describing seventeenth-century and twenty-first-century Europe as equally 'modern' – even though we would hardly describe the execution of witches in the seventeenth century as a 'modern' practice, quite the opposite. Such a concatenation of time periods would obviously be misleading.

Why does this matter, you may ask. First, it matters historically. The use of the word 'medieval' to describe half a millennium conceals how much daily life changed over that time. But more importantly, it suggests that everything we put in the box marked 'medieval' is separate from the modern world. As a result, we fail to realise that the way we live today is largely the result of social developments that took place between the eleventh century and the sixteenth. Many of our contemporary concepts, values and priorities originated in the Middle Ages. Many of our cultural and social practices did too, from our discovery of other continents and races to our use of surnames and our reliance on money and the written word. In short, not to know about the changes that took place in the Middle Ages means failing to understand the cluster of revolutions that shaped the character of the modern world. And that means failing to understand ourselves.

That statement might surprise you because we don't generally regard the Middle Ages as a revolutionary period. We tend to think

that the most significant changes affecting our lives have been modern ones. We point to nineteenth-century inventions such as railways, photography and telephones; and to twentieth-century ones, such as TV, air and space travel, computers and the Internet. Yet although these innovations have completely altered the ways in which we do things, our main priorities as human beings have been surprisingly stable for the last four hundred years (with a few notable exceptions). They were anything but stable before that. If you look beyond the technological advances that have dazzled us since the Industrial Revolution, you will notice that the earlier centuries saw a number of social and economic pressures that profoundly affected our ancestors' thoughts and influenced their behaviour. Many of the changes that took place back then are now so deeply buried in our collective psyche that we never stop to consider them. Why do you think of yourself as an individual? Why do you need to travel? Why do you expect the state to protect you? Why do you need money? Why do we think peace is normal, not war?

This book aims to demonstrate that the Middle Ages were the formative years of the modern world by drawing attention to these fundamental questions. It will also reveal that the major obstacle preventing us from seeing the significance of these earlier changes is our obsession with technology. We are so highly focused on modern manufacturing ingenuity that many people consider the invention of the smartphone or the aeroplane far more significant than our ability to feed ourselves. To someone with a full stomach, methods of food production are nowhere near as impressive as travelling to the other side of the world and speaking to a friend back home on a phone. But to a malnourished peasant at risk of starving to death because of a poor harvest, such technology is a meaningless luxury. And in this respect, we owe a great deal to our medieval forebears. The brutal hardships through which they struggled made them introduce systems that gradually reduced the suffering and which continue to benefit us to this day.

Our interest in the ancient world is another hindrance to understanding the medieval impact. This is because we tend to know much more about the Romans than we do about, say, the people who lived in the thirteenth century. Our fascination with their domestic arrangements, their bustling markets, their systems of administration, their poetry and their love lives, makes it easy for us to think they were 'just like us'. As a result, it appears that there is a two-thousand-year continuity between the world of the emperor Augustus and our world

today. We don't notice the many discontinuities that separate the Romans from the people of medieval Europe. When we read about thirteenth-century people, we imagine their daily lives to be more or less like those of the Romans before them. But if we look closely and try to reconstruct their ways of thinking, we see that medieval people were far from being the same as either Romans or us.

Consider, for example, the mirror, which I will discuss in chapter seven. The Romans had small glass mirrors: Roman ladies used them for applying makeup, just as we do. But then, with the collapse of Roman civilisation, mirrors ceased to be manufactured. We therefore differ from our early medieval ancestors in that we know what we look like and they didn't. You don't get much of a picture of yourself from a reflection in a puddle. You need either a metal-backed glass mirror or a highly polished flat piece of silver or bronze. Metal mirrors were reintroduced to Europe in the early twelfth century but remained expensive, enjoyed only by high-status individuals. Thus the reinvention of the glass mirror in Italy around 1300 allowed increasing numbers of people to see themselves as we see ourselves. Prior to that, an ordinary woman could not know how she appeared in other people's eyes. If she was lucky enough to grow old, she would never have fully appreciated how lined her face was. Not knowing what she looked like, makeup was not something that entered her life. Even more importantly, the rapid spread of mirrors led to people acquiring a new sense of self. This forced them to compare themselves to others: to change their appearance and behaviour, to make themselves more attractive, and so on. At the same time, society gradually began to turn the proverbial mirror on itself – to examine humankind for its own sake and not simply as a creature of God's making. We became aware of the human condition.

Small changes like the introduction of the mirror – which arguably led ultimately to our selfie-taking generation – hint at the complexity and depth of medieval change. I could mention many other examples of seemingly minor medieval innovations that had a profound effect on the modern world. I couldn't describe them all in this book: there were simply too many. Nor could I do justice to all the similar contemporaneous developments around the world that led to some regions developing differently from others. What I *can* do is offer a way to understand all those changes. In the first chapter, I outline how we might use the metaphorical horizon as a tool to appreciate the extent

and importance of social change. The easiest way to explain what I mean by 'the metaphorical horizon' is to talk about explorers. In the eleventh century, no one in Europe had any idea of what lay to the east of Jerusalem or south of the Sahara. Very few Europeans had ever sailed across the Atlantic. But by 1600, a number of maritime expeditions had circumnavigated the globe. In other words, through looking at exploration, we can see how the horizons of Christendom gradually broadened to embrace the entire world.

This expansion of the limits of our knowledge acts as a model for many other aspects of life. Our expanding horizons were not only geographical. There was a similar expanding horizon to how far back we could remember, through the recording of more and more information. There was another expanding horizon to the proportions of the population who owned property, and another to the freedoms women enjoyed. And so on. The purpose of the first chapter is therefore to introduce the idea of the horizon as a way of perceiving social change. In the subsequent chapters, I look at some of the most important themes in history and demonstrate in more depth how the metaphor of the shifting horizon allows us to appreciate the developments that took place. How much faster could people travel in 1600 than in 1000? What proportion of their lives was spent defending themselves against violence? How many of their contemporaries did they consider their equals? How many could read – and why did it matter? I hope that, once you appreciate the concept of the metaphorical horizon, you will see medieval people in a different light – and the light in question is the light of their minds.

That date range – from 1000 to 1600 – might raise questions in your mind about my definition of 'medieval' here. On this matter, it is impossible to please everyone with a single date span. While some English political historians insist that the Middle Ages came to an end abruptly on the afternoon of 22 August 1485, when Richard III was killed at the battle of Bosworth, such hard-and-fast delineations are more misleading than helpful. The fact is that all the ages shade into one another gradually, they don't end with one man's death. Thus the word 'medieval' means different things in different contexts to different people. Most European historians agree that the Middle Ages started with the fall of Rome around 500 and ended around 1500 – normally at some point between the advent of printing in the 1450s and the Reformation, which began in 1517. However, English writers

usually split the period into two phases: the early Middle Ages, which started with the collapse of Roman rule around 410 and ended with the Norman Conquest in 1066, and the later Middle Ages, which ran from 1066 to the final Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540. Some prefer the death of Henry VII in 1509 as the terminal point; others the death of the last Catholic monarch, Mary, in 1558. It hardly needs saying that there is no right or wrong about these differences. It is far better to choose an appropriate set of dates for your subject than stick rigidly to rules devised by other people for different reasons.

In this book, my intention has been to demonstrate a number of social changes between the eleventh century and the sixteenth: hence the approximate date range from 1000 to 1600. The prime reason for starting in about 1000 is that several of the most significant developments of the Middle Ages have their roots in the eleventh century, as consequences of the Medieval Warm Period, which I discuss in chapter three. As for the terminal date, there are two prime reasons for choosing 1600. One is that the following century saw the development of statistics, mathematics, medical thinking and the scientific method, which altered our perceptions of the world and our place in it. It also saw the development of many new scientific instruments. Both the microscope and the telescope were invented about 1600, and these two inventions heralded a new wave of horizons of knowledge that were not at all medieval.

The other reason for choosing the year 1600 is down to Shakespeare, whose plays straddle the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We often say that Shakespeare 'speaks for us' even though he knew nothing of the cars, aeroplanes, computers or mobile phones that we believe play an important part in our lives. He shows us that the ways in which we respect each other and understand each other's emotions are comparable to how people understood each other in 1600. Despite all the technological changes and social revolutions since then, our inner lives have altered very little. Yet Shakespeare is hardly a spokesman for the people mentioned in Domesday Book; he was even further removed from them than Chaucer was. In the eleventh century, one in ten English people was a slave and at least another seven were unfree – meaning that they were bought and sold with the land on which they lived and worked. Shakespeare probably did not even know this. He would almost certainly have presumed that the majority

of English people had always been able to come and go as they pleased. His plays are therefore a useful cultural benchmark for assessing how the English had come to live after six centuries of social and cultural upheaval.

Inevitably, as an English historian, most of my examples are drawn from English sources. It hardly needs spelling out that this does not imply that I believe the English led the way in all the cultural developments discussed in this book, or that other countries mattered less. In the Middle Ages, the English were on the periphery of Christendom and often were followers rather than innovators. It is rather the case that I have drawn on those aspects of the past with which I am most familiar to illustrate how the metaphorical horizon can be used to appreciate social change. A German or Italian historian might just as well explore the shifting cultural horizons of medieval Europe with an emphasis on those countries' experiences. Someone with a deep knowledge of Asian, African or American history could employ the same approach. It would be good if they did. Even if such a study revealed that the most significant cultural shocks in those regions took place in earlier or later centuries, this too would be a valuable application of the idea of the metaphorical horizon, and an important contrast in terms of understanding world history.

Finally, I cannot emphasise strongly enough that the purpose of this book is not to give you all the answers about how life altered over the course of the Middle Ages but to act as a tool that you yourself can learn to apply to past societies to gauge the extent of social change. In this respect it attempts to do for social history what Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* did for the microscopic world when that book was published in 1665. Hooke's pioneering presentation of a few subjects in magnified images – the most famous of these being an 18in-wide picture of a flea – gave his readers a new understanding of microscopic organisms. But it also demonstrated that there was much more to learn about other previously overlooked creatures that he did *not* illustrate. This book similarly shows you that many profound historical changes aren't immediately obvious. In the same way that things close to us often prevent us from seeing what is in the distance – the proverbial wood for the trees – so our present-day perceptions and obsessions with technology are the prime obstacles stopping us from seeing the dynamism

of our medieval past. Obviously, the metaphorical horizon has its limitations. Like the microscope itself, it is not the right tool for every job. However, the idea is put forward in the hope that it helps you achieve a better understanding of the world in which we live – and when, as well as how, it came to be as it is today.

I

Horizons

Introducing the Metaphorical Horizon[1]

When we consider how things have changed over the centuries, we naturally think in terms of technological development. That's not surprising. All around us there are objects that make our lives very different from those of our ancestors, from TVs and kitchen appliances to cars and GPS watches. When we think about the greatest developments in human history, we normally focus on inventions. Flight, mobile phones, space travel, computers and nuclear weapons are the shining stars of such debates. Occasionally we remember something from an earlier age, such as the printing press, the gun, the compass, vaccinations or the clock. But regardless of the preferred epoch, we generally relate social change to technological invention. As a society, we worship technology. You could say that faith these days is not so much a conscious belief in a divine being as a subconscious one in technology – 'In Technology we Trust'.

   This emphasis leads us to calibrate social change by referring to a timeline of technical innovations. In military history, it encourages us to interpret changing methods of warfare in terms of the successive introductions of cannon, handguns, mortars, torpedoes, aircraft, chemical weapons, tanks, bombs, radar and guided missiles. In industrial history we do much the same thing by focusing on various stages of mechanical development, from the spinning jenny in the eighteenth century to steam-powered mills in the nineteenth and automated production lines in the twentieth. Therefore, because technological change is a characteristic of relatively modern times, the further we look back, the fewer changes we see. Consequently, when we consider the Middle Ages, we assume there was little or no social change. The period appears like so many centuries of sword fighting, farming and praying. Society appears to have been largely the same, century after century.

In reality, this picture couldn't be more wrong.

What is particularly curious about this self-deception is that even professional historians endorse it. Specialists in medieval history do not try to argue in public that the fourteenth century was as important for the development of the modern world as the nineteenth or the twentieth. They know that, given the widespread faith in the power of technology, their views would quickly be dismissed and they would be regarded as being out of touch with reality. Even if they were to present the Middle Ages in terms of their genuine technological contributions, the results would emphasise the importance of more recent achievements. No medieval innovation compares with the sophistication of a mobile phone or a laser-guided missile. As a result, the reputation of the Middle Ages in the public imagination remains stuck in a muddy rut. Even the greatest scholars have not been able to change that.[2]

The specialists' dilemma in convincing the wider public of the importance of the Middle Ages is understandable. It is easy for anyone listening to a proselytising professor to conclude that he or she is biased and amplifying the case for the sake of advancing his or her career. But many generalists and public thinkers have also endorsed the idea that the Middle Ages were a time of little social change. And if a world-renowned writer looks at the last thousand years and treats the first half as relatively unimportant, who dares to disagree?

Take Yuval Noah Harari's international bestseller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, published in English in 2014. Chapter fourteen begins like this:

> Were, say, a Spanish peasant to have fallen asleep in 1000 AD and woken up 500 years later, to the din of Columbus' sailors boarding the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria*, the world would have seemed to him quite familiar. Despite many changes in technology, manners and political boundaries, this medieval Rip van Winkle would have felt at home. But had one of Columbus' sailors fallen into a similar slumber and woken up to the ringtone of a twenty-first-century iPhone, he would have found himself in a world strange beyond comprehension. 'Is this heaven?' he might well have asked himself. 'Or perhaps – hell?'

Harari is a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a specialist in medieval warfare. It seems strange, therefore, that he

chose a peasant from the place where Columbus sailed from, Palos de la Frontera, in the south-west of Spain, to serve as his example. In the year 1000, this region was under the control of the caliphate of Cordoba; it remained under Muslim rule until 1262. Harari's Muslim peasant could not have awoken in a more hostile, alien environment than that of the last days of the *Reconquista* in 1492. He would have witnessed the Christian conquest of his homeland and the expulsion, execution or forced conversion of his people. He certainly would not have 'felt at home'. Had he awoken in the twenty-first century, he might be perplexed by the ringing of a mobile phone but at least the Spanish government would not be trying to kill him on account of his religion. Harari seems happy to overlook the historical detail in favour of technological change as the common language for comparison. For someone speaking on an international stage, there is a real advantage in working with the tools that readers already have at their disposal. But in framing the comparison in this way, Harari is following his audience's presumptions, not guiding their understanding. He is passing over major social changes in the medieval period as if they were inconsequential.

I came across a second, equally striking example in a 2018 magazine article by Professor Ian Morris, author of the bestselling book *Why the West Rules – For Now*:

> Take England: if we picked up a peasant from 1750 BC and dropped him or her down in 1750 AD, just before the Industrial Revolution, he or she would have quickly adjusted. Some things had certainly changed: people had switched from round houses to rectangular ones; from farmsteads to (mostly) villages, from bronze to iron, from a sun god to Jesus. The rich now wore powdered wigs and corsets. A few could now read and write, some had eyeglasses, and, in 1784, a Scotsman could fly in a balloon. Yet so much had not changed. The basic patterns of life and death, taxes and rent, sowing and ploughing, deference to lords and ladies – the visitor from 1750 BC would recognise them all. But put that peasant back in the Tardis and catapult him to this age of cars, computers, TV, literacy, skyscrapers, gender reassignment, sexual freedom, democracy, nuclear weapons . . . our peasant would have a nervous breakdown.[3]

In answer to this, 'the basic patterns of life and death' which Morris mentions only in connection with 1750 BC and 1750 AD are still with us today.

We still have to pay taxes and rent. We are still dependent on sowing and ploughing the land (even though most of us don't do it ourselves). There is as much deference to the super rich and celebrities as there was to eighteenth-century lords and ladies. As for the day-to-day differences between 1750 BC and 1750 AD, the problem is that we have no written sources illustrating what life was like in England at the outset of that 3,500-year period. Everything about it has to be inferred from archaeology. However, we do have Julius Caesar's description of the British people at the midway point, in the first century BC. He refers to our ancestors wearing animal skins, wearing their hair long, dyeing their bodies blue with woad to be more frightening in battle, wearing moustaches and 'sharing their wives between groups of ten or twelve men'. Frankly, I cannot see how a Briton of Caesar's time – let alone the Bronze Age – could have adapted more easily to the court of King George II than to putting on a pair of jeans and having a pint in a twenty-first-century pub. Indeed, there are certain modern music festivals where the long-haired, polyamorous ancient Britons would fit in quite well.

If we only ever regard benchmarks of change in terms of technological innovations, it is like looking at the world through a red lens and declaring that everything is red: you don't notice the blue or the green. In our case the lens is technology-coloured and it shows us vividly how technology has affected our lives since the eighteenth century. At the same time it conceals other important changes, such as urbanisation, epidemic diseases, and women's and workers' rights. And it completely obscures almost everything that happened in earlier centuries. Technology did not bring about the French Revolution, which was arguably the most important event of modern times. It did not bring about the Renaissance or the Black Death or the fall of the Roman Empire. In short, if you want to understand social change before 1750, technological innovation is the wrong tool for the job.

Allow me one more example of a highly regarded writer and public commentator underestimating the significance of medieval change. Professor A. C. Grayling's *The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind*, published in 2016, opens with the following lines:

> If you step outside on a warm clear night and look up, what do you see? Imagine answering this question 400 years ago. What did people see then, gazing at the stars? It is remarkable that, in seeing the same thing

we see today, they nevertheless saw a different universe with a completely different set of meanings both in itself and for their own personal lives. This marks a highly significant fact: that, at the beginning of the seventeenth century the mind – the mentality, the world-view – of our best-educated and most thoughtful forebears was still fundamentally continuous with that of their own antique and medieval predecessors; but by the end of that century it had become modern. This striking fact means that the seventeenth century is a very special period in human history.

No serious historian would disagree that 'the mind' of European people in 1700 had recently undergone many of the profound transformations that made it essentially modern. Indeed, the important shift to a widespread trust in the scientific method, medical processes and statistics was well underway in the seventeenth century, and I would argue that this marks a fundamental threshold dividing the medieval and the modern – trust in science was replacing faith in God. But Professor Grayling does not give sufficient credit to developments before 1600. It is certainly not the case that the world-view of the Elizabethans was 'still fundamentally continuous with that of their own antique and medieval predecessors'. Let us not forget that the Romans burnt Christians. They encouraged gladiators to fight to the death for the sake of public entertainment. They consulted animal entrails to determine the future. They owned slaves. They were sexually liberated: their public art showed the erect male member and acts of bestiality; their oil lamps and wine cups depicted threesomes and foursomes. None of these things would have gone down well at the court of the Virgin Queen.

One can go further than this. Elizabeth I's world-view was not even 'fundamentally continuous' with that of her own grandparents, who not only were Catholic but also believed that the sun orbited the Earth. Elizabeth, in marked contrast, was Protestant and might well have come across the highly respected astronomer and MP, Thomas Digges, who popularised and extended Copernicus's heliocentric theory during her reign. Elizabeth's and her grandparents' world-views also differed in regard to the interplay between God, saints and people on Earth, and they had hugely varying concepts of the afterlife. Fifteenth-century Catholics believed that if your arm was in pain, it would be healed if you made a model of it, placed it on an altar and paid a priest

to pray for its recovery. Protestants looked on this practice as an attempt to invoke magic. Indeed, with regard to religion, the world-view of Queen Elizabeth I had much more in common with that of Elizabeth II than it did with that of the Roman emperors, who devoutly worshipped an entire pantheon, from passionate Venus to lecherous Jupiter. These world-views only appear to be 'fundamentally continuous' when you are focused so completely on scientific discovery that you see everything through science-tinted spectacles.

These three examples illustrate my key point. Even our most respected public intellectuals believe that society's development largely depended on technological innovation. My contention is not only that this view is misleading but also that it results in a cultural denigration of the Middle Ages as an unsophisticated 'dark ages' in the public imagination. The medieval period is associated with cruelty, violence, superstition and ignorance – as summed up by derogatory references to the Taliban as 'medieval' and the line in the film *Pulp Fiction*, 'I'm gonna get medieval on your ass'. But this perception is wrong. What of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance? What of the Italian Renaissance? What of the great cathedrals? If you think 'medieval' is synonymous with backwardness, then you are exposing your own ignorance – for this was the age that gave us universities, Parliament and some of the finest architecture to be found in Europe.

Just consider the great painters of the Italian Renaissance. Some people would argue that the achievements of Leonardo and Michelangelo have never been surpassed – that the pinnacle of the painter's skill was reached around 1500. The original version of the *Madonna of the Rocks* (now in the Louvre) was created by Leonardo in the early 1490s, as was his famous *Vitruvian Man* drawing. His *Mona Lisa* was painted in 1503. Michelangelo worked on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512. Nothing produced in the year 1000 can compare. There are many points of similarity between an oil painting of Elizabeth I and one of Elizabeth II – but you will not find any image from 1000 that compares with a fine Renaissance portrait.

Much the same applies to language. Have a look at the beginning of the Gospel of St Mark as it appears in the translation published by William Tyndale in 1526:

1. The beginnynge of the Gospell of Iesu Christ the sonne of God