

Podium report:

## Medieval History after the Global Turn: New (In)Visibilities?

Lucerne, July 11, 2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

*Organizers: Nadège Parent / Daniel Allemann*

*Participants: Klaus Oschema / Kristin Skottki / Isabelle Schürch / Joël Chandelier*

**Report by: Jennifer De Biasio, University of Lucerne**

Until recently, medieval history has mainly been concerned with Latin-Christian Europe. From the 1990s, the 'global turn' brought about new questions, global historical approaches and perspectives. After a preliminary meeting in May, **NADÈGE PARENT** (Neuchâtel) and **DANIEL ALLEMANN** (Lucerne) led this podium discussion about the omnipresent notion of the global Middle Ages. They asked how to react to this trend, and how it affects medievalists' practices, whether it sheds light on forgotten actors and aspects or rather eclipses other important topics, and if it is a genuinely new perspective, a way to be awarded grants, or as Allemann put it, just another "Eurocentric invention to integrate the 'other' into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms". The pointed, rather dialectically phrased questions were not meant to be conclusively answered, but to shed light on less discussed aspects of the opportunities and challenges that come with the new approach. This thought-provoking podium was intended for and visited by a mixed audience of specialists and laypeople alike, early-career researchers, and interested students.

### Introductory Statements and Research Spotlights

To start the discussion, the participants were introduced by Parent and Allemann and asked to give short inputs about what the global Middle Ages meant to them and how they incorporated new perspectives into their respective lines of work. **KRISTIN SKOTTKI** (Bayreuth), a specialist on the Crusades, focuses on intersectionality, intercultural and interreligious relations. As the coordinator of Bayreuth's Master's program "Global History", Skottki is confronted with questions around how to teach global history to an increasingly diverse body of students. Her path towards global history began when she started studying the Middle Ages from a postcolonial perspective, which stems from different historiographical traditions, visions and understandings. According to Skottki, questioning and refuting long-standing master narratives is one of the great potentials of global history, as this

helps scrutinize problematic centrisms and temporal classifications. Unhappy with both the terms 'global' and 'medieval', she proposed to use alternative terms and concepts, such as Michael Borgolte's 'Eurasian Middle Ages', since it allows for the crossing of boundaries and the study of separated and shared spaces at the same time – without taking a Eurocentric approach.<sup>1</sup>

**ISABELLE SCHÜRCH** (Bern) researches various forms of boundary crossing across periods and different spaces. A medievalist by training, she moved on to the Early Modern period, focusing on the entangled relationships between Europe and the colonies of the New World, as well as between human and non-human animals. She explores the potential for inclusion of multiple perspectives, but also the caveats of the global Middle Ages. According to Schürch, the greatest potential for a global medieval perspective is the awareness for the interconnectedness of species, spaces, and shared worlds, showing that dynamic processes and change were and are the norm. At the same time, she cautioned that we tend to forget what, when, where and for whom 'the global' is and that we pretend to be able to look at it from an outside perspective. She instead proposed to remember our own positionality and situatedness, especially when it comes to digitized source material which tends to reproduce colonial power structures.

Overall sharing a similar mindset, **JOËL CHANDELIER** (Lausanne) further highlighted the importance of languages and different historiographic traditions. Chandelier started researching the history of medicine and connections between the Arabic and European world in the early 2000s, becoming a global historian *avant la lettre*. Even though global history did not necessarily change the way he approaches his studies, the field around him changed its approach on global history, which became sought-after and therefore attracted more funding. Chandelier emphasized that by looking at specific topics through the lens of global history, one gets forced to look at topics from different angles, perspectives, and positions in the world, broadening our view to processes of knowledge transmission instead of single incidents.

The self-proclaimed "paradigmatic historian of Europe", **KLAUS OSHEMA** (Paris), has been a critical observer of recent works on the global Middle Ages, proposing to apply 'globalized perspectives' instead of 'the global'. This shift in perspective allows a zooming out to gain a broader view of Europe, thereby making visible the specifics and, most importantly, the similarities between European and non-European regions. By doing so, the old paradigm of Europe's singularity shifts. As problematic as the fragmented perspectives in recent global historiographies may be, Oschema stressed its potential by enforcing transnational collaborations, which demand intensive work but are at the same time extremely productive as they rely on teamwork.

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<sup>1</sup> A selection of works about the Global Middle Ages and related research is given in the bibliography at the end of this report.

## Concepts, Timeframes and Periodization

Even though the backgrounds and approaches varied, the introductions and inputs clearly showed common ground. Drawing on the questioning of Eurocentric concepts and timeframes, Allemann and Parent opened the podium discussion with the question of whether the global Middle Ages prioritized the Late Middle Ages, and if so, in how far?

The answers to this seemingly simple question exposed how debated the terminology and selected timeframes are to this day: Schürch drew on her own research, which, depending on the context, focuses on the Late Middle Ages or Early Modern period, essentially the 15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Skottki cautioned against reviving the ‘zombie’ of the Middle Ages, including the notions affixed to the term, making a case for using the term ‘Early Modern’ to describe the period. Chandelier elaborated further on that point, problematizing the starting and endpoint of *the* Middle Ages. He also suggested that the points of reference in the Middle Ages vary; the point of reference for historians of the Early Middle Ages is the Roman Empire, and researchers of the Late Middle Ages tend to look forward towards the Modern period. In Chandelier’s opinion, the question should rather be: Why Europe? To conclude, Oschema stated that the terms themselves were misleading within the European framework, since it was made up of empires instead of states and fragmented into “national frames” from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

## Publishing Conditions, Authorship and Dominant Languages

The second question, posed by the moderators, revolved around the shifting approaches to publishing, outreach and the indispensability of teamwork in global medieval history. This question was especially relevant for early-career researchers, given the ‘publish or perish’ paradigm in research. Oschema did not see any problems with shifting from single- to multi-authored articles but he made a point of reminding the audience of the importance of finding one’s own niche in research. Throughout the whole podium, Oschema repeatedly stressed how important transnational collaboration was, and that the success thereof hinged on the consideration of epistemological differences and linguistic subtleties. Schürch and Skottki pointed out the systemic difficulties that come with the shift towards multi-authored works, especially since the hierarchies in the specific fields are still mirrored in who gets to write and publish. On the bright side, both pointed out initiatives like graduate schools that have started adapting to the shifting system, encouraging students to both collaborate as well as to find their own voices.

Another challenge that comes with multi-authorship and a shift towards being more global is language, as Oschema pointed out previously. Parent and Allemann inquired about the dominance of anglophone research, the language used by the participants to communicate their research in. The participants seemed to agree that English was becoming the predominant publishing language, inspiring further reflection on power structures and neo-colonial tendencies that create new imbal-

ances in research. At the same time, when looking at the Middle Ages from a global perspective, English is not the *lingua franca* at all. French and Italian seem to be much more important when working with medieval European sources, while Spanish and Portuguese are the main languages in South American research today.

## **New (In)Visibilities**

The organizers went on to ask about new (in)visibilities in global research, getting to the heart of the conference theme. Does global history favor cultural, economic and material over social history? What about the people and things that did not move? Which new actors, themes, and methodologies emerge from this new field of study and at whose expense? Again, these questions were not meant to be definitively answered but rather to inspire reflection. The consensus seemed to be that global history as of now is rather fragmented. One of the pitfalls thereof is the lack of interconnections as well as the predominant focus on topics of trade, science, and climate. Nevertheless, both Skottki and Oschema seem to gain a lot from integrating global perspectives into their teaching, be it by the broadening of material or by crossing disciplinary fields through co-teaching with colleagues from different fields.

## **Audience Questions: Nation States, Losses in Translation and the Inclusion of the Balkans**

Finally, the floor was opened to questions from the audience, which hinted towards the opportunities that still lie in global perspectives. The first one revolved around the paradigm of nation states and on how to avoid teleological narratives of nations in medieval histories. Chandelier proposed that global history might actually help in understanding different models of nation-state formation of countries with the same cultural background (like the Roman or Persian Empire). Schürch proposed another approach, drawing on a practical example of how to “work backwards”: When introducing the Spanish invasion of Latin America, she typically shows her students a picture of a Cortés statue in Mexico and asks how it came to be there. The second question was about the loss of nuance or “spice” in translations. Skottki stated that finding the specificities in global frameworks was one of the huge benefits of studying it. Schürch agreed, explaining that even if the term ‘animal’ is not to be found in Latin American sources, it might show up in later Spanish translations as a terminological overlay of a related concept. The last question revolved around the Balkans and if they were finally being included in medieval European research following the global turn. Skottki answered that they were still mostly excluded from the Western research landscape but that the global approach holds the potential of reintegrating marginalized and excluded aspects. Chandelier closed with the thought that global history makes you think about the scale you want to choose, what Europe means and which geographical regions you want to integrate.

Where does this podium discussion leave us? “Globalized perspectives” have greatly influenced medieval history. Whether as a hope-bearer, irritant or something in between, the global is sure to keep influencing future research. Seen not as a fixed term or a method but rather as a starting point for further reflection, the global can help us see fallacies in master narratives, paradigms, and epistemologies that are normally taken for granted. Allemann and Parent’s well curated podium posed the crucial foundational questions to inspire further thought, showing that the most basic can sometimes be the most fruitful ones.

Jennifer De Biasio

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