

## Introduction

### **The Uses of the Middle Ages in the Construction of European Regional and National Identities (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)**

What role did the medieval past play in the shaping of European regional and national identities? To what extent did literary and historiographical narratives about the Middle Ages produced in the modern and contemporary periods contribute to these processes? How did such phenomena take place in national contexts identified with regions such as the Mediterranean and the Balkans? These are some of the questions at the basis of this thematic issue, which we intend to answer by the (separated or interconnected) reading of these five papers.

Studies about the narratives, representations, and uses of the Middle Ages – what is sometimes defined as “medievalism” (or, as some authors prefer to call, “neomedievalism”) – emerged in the 1970s as essentially an English and German-speaking dominion. The somehow limited scope of their origins is largely explained by the well-established tradition of Romanticism studies in these countries and the inherent connection between the Romantic movement and the almost contemporary often-called “medieval revival” in arts and literature (MATTHEWS 2015: 6-8). This limitation has led to an excessive focus on depictions of the “Middle Ages” centred on Northwestern Europe and the United States, leaving other areas of the globe as peripheral to such analysis (ALTSCHUL 2023: 2). Nonetheless, this field of studies managed to expand to other geographical areas, with a special focus on the European continent, including the Mediterranean. Benefitting from some of the historical liaisons of some of these countries with the Anglosphere and access to European Union research funds, (neo)medievalisms in Portugal, Spain and Italy became the subject of an extensive number of studies, many of them published in English (MATTOSO 2011; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2013; CATTINI and CAO 2015; HERTEL 2015; MIGUÉLEZ CAVERO 2016; CIVANTOS 2017; ARMANDO 2017; MORENO MARTÍN 2017; LONGO 2017; D’AMICO 2017; GARCÍA-SANJUÁN 2018 and 2020; MARTINS 2020 and 2022; MIGUÉLEZ

CAVERO and MARTINS 2023). Extra-EU national contexts such as Turkey (NIEHOFF-PANAGIOTIDIS 2011; ERSOY 2013) are, however, still far from a similar trend, to which the editors of this thematic issue hope to contribute.

Still, as stated by Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri at the conclusions to this issue, the hermeneutic tools of “*histoire croisée*” or “*entangled history*” have helped to build a comprehensive and joint view of the (neo)medievalist productions in these national settings and examine their relationship with other contexts where (neo)medievalism assumed a primordial importance in the construction of local, regional, and national identities. Like what happened in more studied European national contexts, in countries like Portugal, Spain, Italy, or Turkey, the Middle Ages also represented a significant source of artistic and literary inspiration, political legitimization and regional and nation-building processes, whose consequences persist until present times.

Two factors emphasize the need to examine these processes in these national contexts. The first is the necessity to overcome stereotyped views of the medieval period centred on Northwestern and Central Europe. In fact, the very way the concept of the “Middle Ages” was constructed against the idea of “Antiquity” led to a common identification of the medieval period with Northern civilizations, while the Mediterranean was frequently associated with the classical ones (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2020: 4). However, the prominent role of the Mediterranean, in terms of historical development, until the sixteenth century calls for a different outlook on such stereotypes (CATLOS 2017: 12-13). The second factor is the persistence and somehow recent resurgence of what Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri calls “*identitarian medievalism*” in countries like Spain and Italy. Although geographically separated, these spaces have in common a rethinking of their own history in which the Middle Ages are evoked to justify distinctive historical states and national identities (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2020: 176-177, 190-191 and 221). Thus, the editors of this issue hope to contribute to a greater knowledge of the ways medieval peoples, political entities, institutions, documents, monuments, and artworks were used in these countries to construct and validate allegedly unique regional or national identities, in their separate and comparative perspectives.

The order of texts will follow each of these national contexts in a traditional West-East direction. Thus, the first article, by Pedro Redol, focuses on the Portuguese case. Examining a short story by the Romantic historian and writer Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877), Redol dwells into the origins of several narratives about the construction of the chapter hall of the Batalha Monastery, one of the most significant medieval buildings and probably the most important Gothic structure in Portugal. By explaining how these legendary and fictional

accounts influenced modern and contemporary historiographical assumptions about this medieval church, the text provides an important example of the ways early modern narratives about medieval architectural heritage were assimilated by Romantic nationalism, simultaneously contributing to the consolidation and dissemination of a Portuguese national identity.

The second article, by Estefanía Piñol Álvarez's, examines the Spanish and specifically Catalan case. Through an examination of the work of the art historian Josep Puiggarí i Llobet (1821-1903) on late medieval Catalan costumes, traditions, and art – namely the impressive collection of forty-six plates with heliographic reproductions of his drawings – Piñol Álvarez characterizes the art historian's personal motivations and problematizes the links between industrialization, national identity, and nineteenth-century Catalan (neo) medievalism. This text is especially important in a moment when the problem of Catalanism is again achieving a prominent role in Spanish politics.

Francesco Borri and Annamaria Pazienza's text focuses on the Italian case. By examining the historiographical construction and political uses of the Lombards in this national context, the authors reflect upon the important role of the medieval past not only in the Italian nation-building process but also in the shaping of this country's regional and local identities, especially in its northern parts. The text also provides significant insights into the responsibility of historians and archaeologists in the political appropriation of the Middle Ages, a process from which no ideology was exempted since the nineteenth century. Finally, it gives us a glimpse how these historiographical misassumptions contributed to the rise of modern political populisms, a process in which Italy has assumed a significant role.

The following text, written by Nicolò Maggio, takes us to the centre of the Mediterranean with a study of the development of political medievalism in Sicily during the nineteenth century. The author shows us how the medieval past was invoked during this period, on the one hand by the absolutist monarchs of the Bourbon family and, on the other hand, by the romantic intellectuals of the Risorgimento, who sought the recognition and independence of the Italian nation. After a global framing of this process, the author problematises the ways in which the revolt of the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 was studied, interpreted and invoked in that period as a symbol of the autonomy of Italy from the Bourbon and Austrian monarchs. As a historical event that marked the victory of the people of Palermo over one of the main political forces in Western Europe at the time, the Sicilian Vespers, frequently invoked by Italian historiography since the sixteenth century, later served as inspiration for the construction of an Italian and Sicilian national identity.

The final article, by Sabahat Nağme Başaran and Bilge Ar, takes us to the early decades of the Republic of Turkey. It is a study of how journalists in this country understood Hagia Sophia and Byzantine heritage in Istanbul during the 1930s and 1940s. The authors not only demonstrate the significant role of print media in the divulgation of medieval heritage, but also the challenges and problems of using this heritage to build a Turkish national identity. A significant subject that emerges in the text is the constant tension between a religiously motivated and a secular interpretation of medieval art, which in the case of the Republic of Turkey represented a serious matter of political and ideological disputes. The chapter also demonstrates the role of the state and print media in the resignification of medieval buildings, notably Hagia Sophia – which, by Recep Erdoğan's order, was again converted into a mosque in 2020.

A concluding text by Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri that reflects upon the recent development and challenges faced by studies on (neo)medievalism in these national contexts wraps up the dossier. Although dealing with geographically and chronologically separated case-studies, this thematic issue will hopefully help to deconstruct persistent ideas about the Middle Ages in fields such as politics, teaching, heritage, and the tourism industry. This goal is especially relevant in a moment when the medieval period again serves as a tool of political legitimization for wars of aggression, xenophobic proposals, and nationalist solutions. In this context, one of the purposes of this dossier is to contribute with scientific knowledge to social and political debate that can help to solve some of these issues.

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