The Dark Ages


“In her University of Vienna doctoral thesis, ‘Das Schlagwort vom “finsteren Mittelalter”’ (‘The term “Dark Middle Ages”’), in 1931, Lucie Varga observed with characteristic sharpness that ‘terms are war-cries in cultural history’ (Sclagwörter sind kulturgeschichtliche Kampfparole).” 191 this is just an awesome quote and should be used everywhere

much of the historiography on Carolingian period positive and upbeat because of the known high cultural achievements of the period

Classical (Ancient), Medieval, Modern tripartite has been around since Petrarch

“The humanists who took up the idea of the regrettable, and forgettable, Middle Ages in the fifteenth century were obsessed by periodization.” 193

Symbolism of the "Dark" Ages had been around but during the 18th c it became a defining metaphor as the antithesis to the Enlightenment

“These periodizations were on the whole neutral; for in the nineteenth century the medieval became culturally stylish in arts and crafts, while medieval history became respectable, as university men began to profess the subject. In popular usage, though, and particularly since the Second World War, the adjective ‘medieval’ has become strongly perjorative on both sides of the Atlantic.” 194 It is very tempting to see a connection between the timing of this perjorative meaning and the estruction of empires that had been established within the Middle Ages as a result of WWI and WWII...would it be a stretch to see the reaction as part of narrative of that time and those leaders did this but never again?

“Quentin Tarantino has a gangster promising ‘to git Medieval’ on someone's ass. In the press, the Iran of the ayatollahs is described as ‘medieval’, and the same goes for Saddam Hussein's Iraq.” 194 These are great examples!

is there a distinction in French between the terms médiévale and moyen Age?

“Modern French has no equivalent to ‘the Dark Ages’, however, and nor to my knowledge do other vernaculars.” 194

Why has Dark Ages survived in English?

1. need a distinct term for Anglo-Saxon period

“The Dark Ages became the sign of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. Just as Scandinavian Europe hit back against the condescension of modern Continental historiography with ‘the Viking Age’, so the English in their wry and understated way could be assertive about their distinctiveness, and even proud of it.” 195

What would we think of the Anglo-Saxons if their poetry had not survived? Just the histories about them?

2. offers an alternative literary tradition to the classical one

3. Dark Age more inclusive than Anglo-Saxon England (curiously, it is never Romano-British England as if the winner had already been declared even though the extent of Anglo-Saxon rule and conflict has been greatly debate. This particular periodization encodes a historical interpretation and ending

“An American early medievalist, Patrick Geary, has alerted early medieval historians to the topicality, and urgent relevance, of their field, because it’s from ‘pseudoscience’ applied to it that modern nationalist ideologies have drawn dangerous myths with tragic consequences.” 197