How and why have historical interpretations of the period in Western Europe known as the 'Dark Ages' (AD 476-800) changed over time?

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Synopsis

The focus of this essay is concerned with the changing historiography of the historical period both academically and colloquially known as the 'Dark Age'. However, this essay does not investigate the historical chronology of the 'Dark Ages' as a period in itself, nor does it explore the vastness of its historical data. Rather, through a study of the historians who have established differing views on the 'Dark Ages', this essay reveals a striking truism behind the construction of history, and more importantly why historical conceptions inevitably undergo amendment. Thus while addressing the respective contexts of each historical interpretation of the period, it is evident that historical periods which have consecutively followed the 'Dark Ages'—whether it be Renaissance humanism or Enlightenment philosophy—have inevitably constructed the historical perceptions of the period. The extent to which this has occurred is demonstrated through a study of the early medieval historian's primary experience of the 'Dark Age' who wrote a history of the period reflective of a certain milieu and belief system. Although this too suggests a historical paradigm, a comparison of primary history with later reinterpretations is instrumental in understanding the diversity and evolution of these historical opinions. Therefore over time, the 'Dark Age' period has accumulated a difference of historical opinion, which to some extent has distorted our perceptions of the period today. The twentieth century, and more recently the twenty-first century has attempted to amend this distorted historical outlook on the 'Dark Ages' within the greatly changed historical environment which has professionalised and popularised new scientific, scholarly and archaeological approaches to history. While this may seem to signify that a general historical consensus has been reached, recent debate over the extent of modern reinterpretation of the period has shown that the 'Dark Ages' is no different from all history, as historian Pieter Geyl said, 'it is an argument without end'.

The Essay

Historical interpretations of the 'Dark Age' period have undeniably been constructed by particular contexts of historical thought. Often the period has been judged in light of the grandeur of the Roman Empire, with its denigration enabling later historians to distinguish themselves from it. Hence, in historical tradition the term 'Dark Ages' was bestowed upon the period as a metaphor for both the historical ignorance of the period due to the paucity of its sources, and the uncivilised "barbaric" nature of its culture, which had enveloped the Empire in the wake of its fall. The former meaning of the 'Dark Ages' can now be dismissed due to the wealth of sources discovered in the last century. However the pejorative connotations of the term have been perpetuated in both academic and public environments since the 'Dark Age' itself, continuing through to the early Renaissance of Petrarch, Edward Gibbon's Enlightenment, and more recently the modern age of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nevertheless, the later half of the twentieth-century has seen a positive change in the attitude of historians toward the period, demonstrating that 'the fall of an empire is not necessarily the end of civilisation'. Therefore in exploring the scholarship of the 'Dark Ages', it becomes apparent that the historical interpretations of the period have changed as a result of the evolving nature of historiography, context and purpose.

To establish how historical interpretations of the 'Dark Ages' have changed, it is imperative that the primary depictions of the period be examined. Although the metaphor 'Dark Age' was not coined by primary historical accounts, these certainly contributed to the basis of later historical perspectives on the period. These medieval historians include the Venerable Bede and Gregory of Tours, who wrote primarily ecclesiastical histories which follow Augustine of Hippo's conception of linear history and universal history in City of God. The primary history of the period is thus set against a new tradition of Christian historiography which rejected the cyclical nature of Classical history in deference to a history that 'is no longer historia, research, inquiry, critical investigation: it has become God's purpose revealed in man'. Consequently, Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People relates a history which 'evokes an idealised past and devalues the present' in the style of an 'early propagandist history'. Bede's criticism of his own period propagated a use of the
metaphor of light and darkness in religious terms, to describe the ascendency of one culture (Christianity) over another. Using the example of the visit of Bishop Germanus sent from Rome to combat the Pelagian heresy, Bede conveys the Christian attitude towards paganism and heresy, saying ‘Germanus full of the holy spirit, invoked the trinity...containing relics of the saints...he pressed it in the sight of all on the Girl's eyelids; her eyes were immediately delivered from the darkness and filled with the light of the truth...’. Furthermore, Gregory of Tours’ History of the Franks, written during a disintegrating Romanised Gaul and the emerging Frankish Merovingian period, only furthered the disdainful impression of the period with his Christian moralism, wherein the ‘Histories was meant to be, above all, a vehicle of Christian instruction’. Thus Gregory describes through what is modernly termed ‘superstition’, the design of God in his period. This is evident in one instance where Gregory recounts that ‘the cocks crow at the beginning of the night. The moon darkened and a comet appeared in the sky. A serious epidemic followed among the common people’. Gregory’s history is obviously a morbid and disconcerting narrative of events which is reminiscent of the prophecies detailed in the biblical Revelations, but it is also ‘dark’ in the secular details it relates, comparing one Merovingian King, Chilperic, to the ‘Nero and Herod of our time’. It is not surprising then, to find that to later historical generations, Gregory’s history would certify ‘that the Dark Ages were, at least for the moment, authentically dark’. Through Bede and Gregory of Tours, it can therefore be argued, that the essentially pejorative connotations of the ‘Dark Age’ were established.

However, the historical metaphor ‘Dark Age’ did not originate within the ‘Dark Age’ itself, despite the bleak illustration medieval historians provide. As Walter Goffart argues, ‘to suggest that they [medieval historians] document the “Dark Ages” would validate a historical metaphor that was not in their heads’. Rather modern historians have identified the use of the term with the fourteenth-century humanist poet and scholar Petrarch. The Christian meaning of the metaphor was invented by Petrarch’s humanist contemplations, but nonetheless it did not imply a disdain for Christianity, as later Enlightenment historians would seem to relate. It implied a disregard for Christian history and a resurrection of the Res Publica of Rome’s former “light” which formulated Petrarch’s conception that ‘What else, then, is all history, if not the praise of Rome?’. Moreover, Petrarch was an Italian scholar intent on preserving the few remnants of classical achievement, such as the works of Cicero, which were being lost or purposefully destroyed by the monastic libraries. In essence, Petrarch was an Italian nationalist by heart, ‘led in part by his profound conviction that his contemporaries were inheritors and continuers of the Roman Empire’, of which he is quoted for the belief that ‘Rome would rise up again if she but began to know herself’.

Petrarch’s humanism was conjoined to the state of his world, in which he described himself as ‘a man standing between two worlds; I look both forward and backward’. Petrarch’s age was an abyss defined by the decadence, greed and insecurity plaguing Italy under the blackmailing Holy Roman Emperor Louis of Bavaria; the self-interested Popes in Avignon; warring city-states; the Black Death of 1348; and the beginning of large-scale war in Europe with the advent of the Hundred Years War in 1337. Hence the voice of Petrarch no doubt contained a pessimistic attitude towards his age, Theodore Monummen suggests that he even saw his own time as a mere continuation of the period of imperial decline. Petrarch was unmistakably a product of his time and it is therefore apparent that circumstance inspired his conception of the ‘Dark Ages’ in the concluding lines of his poem Africa, where he accepts that ‘my fate is to live amid varied and confusing storms’. Petrarch ardently hopes that ‘there will follow a better age’ where the ‘sleep of forgetfulness’ and ‘the darkness has been dispersed’ so that ‘our descendants can come again in the former pure radiance’. Petrarch’s distinction between ‘darkness’ and ‘pure radiance’ instituted the future historical tradition that rendered a period of approximately five hundred years to the worthless status of a ‘Dark Age’. Most important in Petrarch’s conception of the ‘Dark Age’ is its underpinning humanist ideology, which transformed the fundamentally religious meaning of the ‘Dark Ages’ into a historical conception, demonstrating how attitudes toward the period have essentially evolved with the prevailing historical context of consecutive historians.

The disdainful impression Petrarch had of the ‘Dark Ages’, was only reinforced further in historical tradition with the advent of the Enlightenment and Edward Gibbon. Gibbon’s critical appraisal of the later Roman Empire and the ‘Dark Ages’ in his The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, had a significant impact on the historiography of the period, as even today modern scholars are still contending with the historiographical consequences. This is principally because Gibbon wrote a history intent on examining the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, while medieval civilisation is ‘held against the yardstick of classical culture and found wanting’. Hence one of Gibbon’s central themes was barbarism and civilisation, the dialectics of the past, wherein Gibbon believed that Roman civilisation fell through the workings of its antitheses: “the triumph of barbarism and religion”. As Roy Porter suggests, Gibbon was disgusted at Christianity’s ‘reputation of all that had been the glory of the commonwealth. No one could be more unlike the Roman citizen than the Christian monk”.

The Enlightenment tradition, which Gibbon certainly belonged
to, admired Roman civilisation as an enlightened society; coincidentally the role of Christianity in destroying Roman civilisation was in Gibbon’s mind, a foremost consideration in the history of the early middle ages.

Accordingly, Gibbon held Christianity as a determining factor in the creation of the ‘Dark Ages’, due to the corruption of the ‘sublime and simple theology of the primitive Christians’ 27. Gibbon saw the ‘Dark Ages’ as a time where the ‘light’ of philosophy, rationales and reason that defined not only Roman civilisation, but his own period of ‘Enlightenment’, were extinguished in the ‘Dark Ages’ by the bigotry and superstition of religion. This is epitomised in Gibbon’s assertion that the destruction of learning, in the library of Alexandria, ‘excited the regret and indignation of every spectator whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice’ 28. Gibbon’s view of the ‘Dark Ages’ must also be seen within an ‘atmosphere charged with religious electricity’ 29, wherein Gibbon as a Protestant attacked the overall indulgence of the clergy, Popery, and credulous seduction of the people by the Catholic Church 30. To the Protestant and Enlightenment philosopher, the ‘Dark Ages’ symbolised the oppressive dominance of the Catholic Church as an “Age of Faith”. The dynamics of context taken into account make apparent that Edward Gibbon propagated a view of the ‘Dark Ages’ reflective of eighteenth-century attitudes, with a historical purpose in mind that could, as Rosamond McKitterick suggests, only offer a ‘superficial’ 31 appraisal of the period. Nevertheless, Gibbon’s history is evidence of the evolving nature of historical interpretation of the period, wherein the term was manipulated by Gibbon to serve the ideological mantras of his period and pronounce the ascendancy of one culture over another, just as his predecessors Bede and Petursh had done so.

The historiographical process culminated in the early twentieth-century, which saw the first break from the traditional meaning of the ‘Dark Ages’ in the challenging thesis of Belgian historian Henri Pirenne 32. The ‘Pirenne Thesis’, which appeared in Pirenne’s Mohammed and Charlemagne, essentially came to the conclusion that the ‘barbarian invasions’ that supposedly overran Roman civilisation never actually destroyed anything; they were a ‘non-event’ 33. Pirenne argued that the survival and unity of ‘Romania’ rested upon the commerce of the unifying Mediterranean Sea, which had not been destroyed by the barbarians. Therefore Pirenne largely argued for Roman continuity in Western Europe after the fall of Rome, a conclusion that significantly challenged the ‘dark’ view of post-Roman Europe. However, it was the significance of Pirenne’s fundamentally economic approach which opened up ‘radically divergent directions’ 34 of viewing the past, it allowed Pirenne and future historians to challenge ‘historical clichés’ 35 especially the notion of a ‘Dark Age’.

Well before the ‘Pirenne Thesis’ was eventually proven wrong by archaeology in the 1980s, other historians had emerged out of the atmosphere of reinterpretation that Pirenne had instigated. In 1971, Peter Brown established a new historical conception of the period known as ‘Late Antiquity’, in his widely acclaimed book The World of Late Antiquity. Brown recognised that archaeology has demonstrated the drastically reduced scale of post-Roman life, yet stressed a degree of Roman continuity through culture, that fostered the transformation of the Roman world into the diverse world we now know as modern Europe. In doing so, Brown attempted to construct a positive view of the period through its religious, social and cultural aspects, and eradicate the accumulated stereotypical notions of the “Roman”, “barbarian” and the “Dark Ages” that are ‘deeply embedded in the visual imagination of most Europeans’ 36. The established interpretations of historical sources have also been re-evaluated by Brown, such as the bleak illustration of post-Roman Gaul described by Gregory of Tours, which Brown argues with a closer reading reveals that it was a ‘none the less stable post-Roman society…[which] had by no means sunk into aimless barbarism’ 37. The work of Peter Brown has rehabilitated our view of the period, as the term ‘Dark Age’ is now used neutrally and has lost historical application. Consequently, from the foundations of Peter Brown’s notion of ‘Late Antiquity’ sprang forth a burgeoning of positive scholarship that values ‘micro-history and a healthy respect for the pluralism of historical experience’ 38 in an atmosphere decidedly free of ‘institutional frameworks’ 39. This has seen previous prejudices disappear, exemplified in one historian Walter Goffart, who has attempted to ‘liberate barbarian history from German nationalism’ 40 and the ‘myth of Germans before Germany’ 41. Furthermore, from the 1960s onwards, early medieval archaeology has assisted in creating a picture of productive diversity in ‘Dark Age’ Europe, revealing the ‘extraordinary ability of the people of this period to forge new identities’ 42 and lay the ‘foundations for modern Europe’ 43. In this way, historical perspectives on the ‘Dark Ages’ have seemingly modernised; even so, this new atmosphere of positivism has prompted a challenge over the extent and motivation behind this reinterpretation.

This revisionist challenge has come in the form of British historians who have disputed the ‘new and rosy Late Antiquity’ 44 that they argue is a misnomer largely based on the continued prosperity of the Orient 45, and the seemingly positive spread of Christianity over Europe. Historian Bryan Ward-Perkins asserts that important secular facets of life in the post-Roman age have largely been ignored by the historians of Late Antiquity, and have been replaced by subjects such as spirituality, sexuality and church history that resembles an older interpretation of the period as a golden ‘Age of Faith’ 46. Ward-Perkins believes that the
efforts of historians such as Peter Brown and Walter Goffart to dispel traditional notions of the post-Roman period as a time of 'decline' and replace them with terms such as 'rise' and 'transformation' misrepresents the reality of the post-Roman material evidence from the secular world. Such material evidence is primarily archaeological data which displays a clear image of 'decline' in the 'Dark Ages'. For example, alongside the intricate craftsmanship of the gold artefacts from the famous Sutton Hoo ship burial in Britain, a pottery bottle was found with a quality below Roman and even Iron Age standards—suggesting a loss of the basic skills which are usually indicative of a prospering society and economy.

Thus 'Late Antiquity' is argued by Ward-Perkins to reflect concerns of our 'new age', including the post-colonial tendency of the twenty-first century; which has accumulated a hatred for empires and the notion of 'civilisation' that implies the ascendancy of one culture over another. Rather, developments such as the European Union, political correctness and the relativity of experience in a supposedly "post-modern world", have dulled the distinction of cultural superiority into the general term of 'cultures', free from value judgements. Nevertheless, this is a view that ignores the reality that "for better or worse, some cultures are much more sophisticated than others". Peter Heather, another historian of this view, is disconcerted at the influence of post-modern theory on historians, who "have even been led to doubt whether it is possible...to get past the sources' representations of reality to "actual events"." In fact, it is argued that Peter Brown's work on subjects such as sexuality drew on the work of social theorists and historians like Michel Foucault.

For Ward-Perkins, his perspective is derived from a traditional Oxford education and a 'very Oxfordian upbringing' in Italy where "the primacy of the ecclesia" is seldom doubted, and a traditional view of the Roman world is very much alive. The contemporary debate over the 'Dark Ages' is thus considerably defined by one question. Which aspects of human life are more important to historians today? The varying answers offered by both sides come from distinctive climates of historiography and ideology. The positivism of Petrarch and Gibbon, the 'Dark Ages' was "dark" because it served the historian. Just as the "illumination" of the 'Dark Ages' by historians today, must also be seen in the context of modern ideology. Hence it is evident that only when the motivation of the historian, both inadvertent and deliberate, becomes purely to discover history, that the 'Dark Ages' will be truly illuminated.

Endnotes

1 Pieter Geyl, Dutch Historian (1887-1966).
3 The Venerable Bede: Britain AD 672-735.
4 Bishop Gregory of Tours: Gaul AD 538-594.
6 Lear, F. S. (1933) The medialeval attitude toward history. University extension lectures, p166.
10 c. AD 500 - AD 751.
13 Ibid, p231.
16 Formally known as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) see appendix I.1.
19 Ed. Findlen, p234.
22 Ibid, p234.
23 Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) see appendix I.2.


32 Henri Pirenne, Belgian economic historian (1862-1935) see appendix 1.3.


41 Ibid, p.55.


43 Ibid, p.65.


45 The Orient refers to the Eastern Byzantine Empire, the Levant and Islamic Caliphate, which prospered for centuries after the fall of Rome.


49 Ibid, p.179.


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