THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE AS A EURASIAN PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

That the period c. 1000-1300 CE was one of transformation in Europe, amounting to “the birth of Europe”, is widely agreed among specialists in the region. The present paper argues not only that this transformation can be described in terms analogous to those held to amount to the “Axial Age” around 500 BCE or the “cultural constitution of modernity” around 1800, but that comparable transformations can be discerned in the other literate civilizations of Eurasia at the same epoch. It maintains, however, that these transformations were precipitated not by contacts between the civilizations, but by internal developments within each of the civilizations, arising from common exposure to the social and economic consequences of intensive economic growth, in particular as they affected the position and influence of the clerical elites. This common transformation has been less noticed and is more difficult to describe than those of the “Axial Age” or “modernisation” because the contrasting responses of the respective elites to these challenges sharpened the social, cultural, and political differences between the civilizations and set them on diverging historical trajectories: its leading characteristic and consequence, therefore, was differentiation, rather than integration or homogenization.

The recognition of the emergence of Latin Christendom—to which western historians often refer as “medieval civilization”—as a distinctive artefact of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is relatively recent and not wholly uncontroversial, a piecemeal achievement of twentieth-century historiography. Regional specialists naturally describe the changes which...
took place in north-western Europe during that period very differently, according to their philosophical and historiographical persuasions. Nevertheless, they are to all intents and purposes unanimous that those centuries saw the completion of a set of interlinked changes in economy, society and culture amounting to a transformation of the quality and conditions of social and political life. Many of them would be happy to describe that transformation as, or as involving, a deep-seated cultural crystallisation, and, taking a step further, to agree that it issued in long-term historical processes—since it is from this point that the continuous history of Europe as a single distinctive cultural formation is readily discernible—or even, taking another, that it constituted a turning point in world history, since it set Europe on the path towards the breakthrough to modernity which (as most European historians take for granted) was essentially a European development. There is currently acute disagreement as to whether these changes resulted from an eleventh-century crisis, which has until recently been the consensus, or from gradual, cumulative changes in economy, society and culture which had been in train at least since the ninth century. However, that question is not immedi-


Dominique Barthélémy, “La mutation féodale, a-t-elle eu lieu?”, Annales ESC 47 (1992), 767-77, and several subsequent papers, collected and amplified in Barthélémy, La mutation féodale, a-t-elle eu lieu? Servage et chevalerie dans la France du xe et xiiie siècle (Paris, 1997), directed in the first instance against the views developed by Georges Duby from the 1940s. Duby’s fundamental arguments are most clearly presented in the papers collected in Hommes et structures (Paris, 1974, substantially translated as Chivalrous Society, London, 1977); see also his Guerriers et paysans (Paris, 1973, = The Early Growth of the European Economy (London 1974) and Les trois ordres (above, n. 2). On Duby’s work see