

Centuries of Transition

Tuesday 19 May 2020, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2011).

This review of Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* situates the book within the context of his earlier writings on the transition to feudalism, and contrasts his explanation for and dating of the process with those of the two main opposing positions set out in Perry Anderson's *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974) and Guy Bois's *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand* (1989). Although *Framing* modifies some of Wickham's earlier positions, it largely sidesteps explicit theoretical discussion for a compellingly detailed empirical study which extends to almost the entire territorial extent of the former Roman Empire. The review focuses on three main themes raised by Wickham's important work: the existence or otherwise of a 'peasant'-mode of production and its relationship to the 'Asiatic' mode; the nature of stateformation and the question of when a state can be said to have come into existence; and the rôle of different types of class-struggle - slave-rebellions, tax-revolts and peasant-uprisings - in establishing the feudal system.

Why should readers of *Historical Materialism* consider reading a book by a specialist in early-Italian history, containing 831 pages of text and dealing with Europe and the Mediterranean world between the fifth and ninth centuries AD? *Framing the Early Middle Ages* was awarded the Deutscher Memorial-Prize for 2006, which suggests that it may interest a wider audience than the fellow-medievalists Chris Wickham addresses in his Introduction. There, 'you the reader', is assumed to belong to a group of 'experts' who 'often . . . know far more than I about a given set of materials'. [1] In the case of this reviewer, Wickham need have no such concerns, since my area of expertise lies in a historical period which opens nearly 900 years after his closes and with a country (Scotland) which he specifically excludes from discussion. [2] My purpose here will therefore not be to dispute with Wickham over, for example, his explanation for why there are greater similarities between Syro-Palestinian and Italian ceramics than between either of these and ceramics of Egyptian origin. [3] Instead, I approach the book in the same way as most other nonspecialist readers of this journal: as a Marxist interested in what a fellow-Marxist has to say about a crucial, but deeply obscure turning-point in human history and what implications his work has for Marxist theory. As we shall see, his work is full of interest in both respects.

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Footnotes

[1] Wickham 2005, p. 9.

[2] Wickham 2005, p. 6, n. 6.

[3] Wickham 2005, pp. 728-41, 759-80.