



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Book Review: The invention of race in the European Middle Ages
Author(s)	Dempsey, Karen
Publication Date	2019-06-18
Publication Information	Dempsey, Karen (2019). Book Review: The invention of race in the European Middle Ages. By Geraldine Heng. 493 pp, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-108-42278-9, Medieval Archaeology, 63(1), 191-231. doi: 10.1080/00766097.2019.1601914
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2019.1601914
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15518
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2019.1601914

Downloaded 2024-04-25T17:59:53Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



***The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages.* By Geraldine Heng. 19 x 26 cm. xiii + 493 pp, 10 b&w pls. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-108-42278-9. Price: £34.99 hb.**

Why has critical race theory failed to engage with the middle ages? Medievalists have consistently demonstrated that studies of the medieval past shape our current perceptions of gender and sexuality (see *The Public Medievalist*). Why should race be any different? This question forms Heng's central thesis: race is a key concept for studies of the European middle ages. She demonstrates how race was constructed, enacted and self-identified or imposed upon others in the medieval period, both within and beyond Europe. This includes somatic or epidermal comprehensions of race and intersections with empire, power, religion, culture, literature, art and gender. Heng successfully balances the macroscale grand narratives with small stories. She demonstrates that it is possible to capture medieval ideas on the ever-changing understandings of race across a wide geographic and culturally diverse area, while not losing sight of the lived experience. Her own methodology of narrating an entangled web of social relations and meanings is reflected in the entwined global middle ages she presents. The book comprises seven chapters: the first four combine a detailed historiography and critical interrogation of race in the middle ages, which are followed by three detailed case-study chapters. The final chapter focusses on the life-history of the Romani and it is a deeply thoughtful contribution to 21st century scholarship. The examination of how race-making in the medieval world has contributed to racial prejudices in the modern world is a triumph of this book.

Archaeological evidence features in Heng's analyses, but it is not foregrounded. Discussions of material culture are most prominent in Chapter 5 'World I', which explores encounters between the indigenes of Northern America and the Greenlanders during the 9th and 10th centuries. However, exchange and gift giving, as remembered in the sagas and from archaeological evidence, are understood from processual and economic transactional perspectives with little importance placed on the social meanings of objects, their materiality or agency. This is where a deeper engagement with archaeological theory would have enriched the text. Medievalists should grasp the opportunity to embed social archaeology firmly into the growing field of the Global Middle Ages.

The convincing application of critical race theory to the middle ages means this book is equally valuable to archaeologists, art historians or literature specialists. We should all read it, if only to respond to Heng's gentle but appropriate rebuke to (euro)archaeologists, who she believes 'are not well-served by evading the category of race'.

<https://www.publicmedievalist.com/>

KAREN DEMPSEY (University of Reading)

398 words