BOOK REVIEW

Seb Falk. *The Light Ages: A Medieval Journey of Discovery*. London: Allen Lane, 2020. 392 pp.

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Seb Falk's *The Light Ages* follows the life of a Benedictine "scholar-monk" named John Westwyk (ca. 1350–1400). His colorful career at the abbey of St. Albans, the priory of Tynemouth, and abroad furnishes the book with a variety of settings within which a compelling narrative of the history of medieval science can be told. Indeed, despite his obscurity and the relative paucity of documentary evidence attesting to his life, Westwyk is presented to the reader in dramatic fashion: "A man born in a rural manor, educated in England's grandest abbey, exiled to a clifftop priory. A crusader, inventor, astrologer" (p. 12). *The Light Ages* cannot be called a biography, however. Fascinating though Westwyk's life may be, Falk's aim is too ambitious for the scope of his book to be confined to a single person. As the title would suggest, he is seeking to turn the hoary stereotype that characterizes the medieval period as a dark age squarely on its head.

Such an effort is not without precedent, and, by now, one can find with profit a body of monographs and scholarly articles that make a similar case for both the existence and the

importance of a thing called “medieval” science. To present a cogent and plausible case, one must enlist as evidence a host of practices, the number of which one individual could not be expected to have accomplished in a single lifetime. Thus, Westwyk plays the role, not of a singular protagonist, but rather of a representative and a guide through a tradition (or rather traditions) that, not only spanned centuries, but also geography, culture, language, and disciplinary boundaries. Like Virgil guiding Dante through paradise or Geoffrey Chaucer’s interlocutors taking the reader on their way to Canterbury, the stages of Westwyk’s life are laid out as an itinerary for Falk to use to hone in on important knowledge forms and practices, as well as their relationship to the social and institutional fabric of medieval society.

In fact, Geoffrey Chaucer plays a central role in the book from the start. In the introduction Falk recounts a gripping story of the discovery, nearly 70 years ago, of a Middle English astronomical instrument text, the *Equatorie of the Planetis* (dated 1393), by Derek Price. Based upon the manuscript’s date, the author’s decision to write in English, and the appearance of Chaucer’s name in the text, Price believed it belonged to the celebrated poet. Later—and less glamorously—found by Kari Anne Rand to have been written in Westwyk’s hand, Falk uses Rand’s discovery as a way to introduce his guide.

The first chapter establishes John’s place of origin from the toponym “Westwyk”—a manor that St. Albans had acquired around the time of his birth. Falk explains that the way of life typical of a fourteenth-century peasant was rooted in agricultural practices and deeply informed by the cyclical rhythms of the seasons. He addresses the importance of folk astronomy in traditional agricultural societies—traceable to antiquity, but still alive and strong on the medieval manor. In the 1370s, Westwyk entered the Benedictine Order at St. Albans. In chapter 2, Falk discusses the role of astronomical observation in the monastery where religious practice was regulated by the hours of prayer. The daily hours and religious feast days were codified in a science known as *computus*, which sought to ensure the time of religious observance conformed to the positions of the heavenly bodies.

Given that Westwyk wrote glosses on astronomical instruments as well as his own treatise, Falk assumes that he received training outside of the monastery, likely at Oxford University. Thus, in chapter 3, there is a transition from the practical matters of monastic timekeeping to the more theoretical content of the seven liberal arts and natural philosophy, which were taught within the university curriculum. In chapter 4, Westwyk has returned to monastic life where, in a manner befitting his university formation, he copied two texts written by his renowned predecessor and abbot of St. Albans, Richard of Wallingford. In this chapter Falk gives a lucid description of Wallingford’s instruments—the *Rectangulus* and the *Albion*—as well as the much more commonly used astrolabe (Wallingford’s famous clock is treated in chapter 2).

In the early 1380s, Westwyk was sent to the priory of Tynemouth, where Falk shows he calculated and composed his own table of oblique ascension, and gave instructions for dividing

the houses of a horoscope. Falk uses this chapter to talk more generally about the importance of astrology during the period. In 1383, Westwyk left the priory to join a crusade in Flanders leveled against supporters of the anti-pope in Avignon. Falk takes the opportunity here to describe navigation and medical practice, as the crusaders depended upon both sailors and physicians on their campaign. The final chapter treats the text that began the book: Westwyk's *Equatorie of the Planetis*. Written towards the end of his life, Westwyk's *Equatorie* was a work that combined the monk's knowledge of the planetary models of Ptolemaic astronomy with his skill as an instrument-maker.

Falk's work is replete with beautiful images, diagrams, and nine color plates. In the spirit of a good guidebook, there is a section for further reading, just before the endnotes, where a bibliography is provided for each of the chapters' major themes. It was wise to include such a feature, for a book of this breadth can only scratch the surface in the many areas that are treated. Elegantly written in a way that showcases a command of his field, Falk is at his best when he describes complex astronomical instruments with brevity and clarity. Up-to-date in its historiography and pitched at a non-specialist audience, *The Light Ages* would be an excellent choice for a course in the history of science at the high school or university level.