

Contemporary Approaches to the Medieval Historical Writing

A. A. Palamarchuk, S. E. Fyodorov

For citation: Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. Contemporary Approaches to the Medieval Historical Writing. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2021, vol. 66, issue 4, pp. 1392–1399. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2021.420>

The perception of insular historiography for a long time has been determined by the view outlined in the fundamental work by Antonia Gransden in the 1970s–1980s. Historiography as a whole, its distinct schools and movements are regarded as “passive” participants, whose functions were related to reflection of historical events. An opposing approach, which shifts the attention from the content of the narrative to its formal structure, is represented by such outstanding scholars as M. Clanchy and B. Guenée. They focused on the mechanisms of creating narratives, their genre specificity, inner structure, the role of historiography within intellectual space and its social functions. The collection “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” to a large extent follows the tradition of studying perceptions of the past across long historical periods, combining it with innovative approaches of participants of the projects. The novelty of the collection lies in the pan-British context of its approach to historiography. Thus “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” continues the contemporary trend of viewing the British Isles as a distinct historical and cultural region within which the combination of disintegrating factors (diversity of political forms, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, irregularity of continental influences) and unifying factors (ethnogenetic and dynastic myths, the concept of pan-British leadership, means of social and power interactions) determined the specificity of the development compared to the continental variant. The rejection of Anglocentric model of approaching the history and culture of the British Isles leads to the reconsideration of the British periphery.

Keywords: historical writing, historiography, insularity, Britain, England, Middle Ages.

Современные подходы к изучению средневекового историописания

А. А. Паламарчук, С. Е. Федоров

Для цитирования: Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. Contemporary Approaches to the Medieval Historical Writing // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. История. 2021. Т. 66. Вып. 4. С. 1392–1399. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2021.420>

Anastasia A. Palamarchuk — Dr. Sci. (History), Professor, St. Petersburg State University, 7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation; a.palamarchuk@spbu.ru

Анастасия Андреевна Паламарчук — д-р ист. наук, проф., Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7–9; a.palamarchuk@spbu.ru

Sergey E. Fyodorov — Dr. Sci. (History), Professor, St. Petersburg State University, 7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation; s.fedorov@spbu.ru

Сергей Егорович Федоров — д-р ист. наук, проф., Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7–9; s.fedorov@spbu.ru

© St. Petersburg State University, 2021

Видение специалистами культуры инсулярного историописания длительное время определялось ракурсом, намеченным в фундаментальном труде А. Грансен в 1970–1980-х гг. Историописание в целом, отдельные школы и направления осмысляются ею в качестве «пассивного» участника, функция которого — отражать перипетии событийной истории, концептуализируя и структурируя их, определяя ту логику нарратива, которая позволит обществу максимально полно усваивать его содержательное наполнение. Противоположный подход, предполагающий переключение внимания с содержательной стороны исторического нарратива на формальную сторону его организации, представлен такими выдающимися фигурами, как М. Т. Кленчи и Б. Гене. Их внимание сосредотачивалось на механизмах создания нарративов, жанровых спецификациях, внутренней структурной организации, месте в интеллектуальном пространстве и социальных функциях исторических сочинений. Коллективная монография “*Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500*” («Средневековое историописание. Британия и Ирландия, 500–1500 гг.») во многом продолжает традицию изучения представлений о прошлом на протяжении длительных исторических периодов, сочетая ее с новаторскими подходами членов авторского коллектива. Перед ними стояла исключительно сложная задача: с одной стороны, дать читателю полноценную картину эволюции средневекового историописания, а с другой — преодолеть ограничения, накладываемые традиционной моделью рассмотрения исторических сочинений в хронологическом порядке их создания. Новаторством, отличающим данную монографию, является общебританский контекст рассмотрения историописания. Рассматриваемая в статье коллективная монография органично вписывается в актуальный сегодня историографический тренд на восприятие Британского архипелага как особого историко-культурного региона, в пределах которого сочетание дезинтегрирующих (разнообразие форм политической организации, этническая и лингвистическая неоднородность, неравномерность континентальных влияний) и интегрирующих факторов (этногенетические и династические мифы, концепт общебританского лидерства, способы социального и потестарного взаимодействия) определяло специфический по сравнению с континентом региональный вариант развития.

Ключевые слова: историописание, историография, методология, инсулярность, Британия, Англия, Средние века.

The perception of insular historiography for a long time has been determined by the view outlined in the fundamental work by Antonia Gransden in the 1970s–1980s¹. In her monumental work, she presented the logic of development of historiography, in its succession and dynamics of narrative forms, as influenced by the logic of development of the state in its dynastic dimension; by the methods of ruling; by the system of emerging interactions and conflicts in the British society (those between the Crown and the Church, between the center and periphery, between competing dynasties, elites etc.). Historiography as a whole, its distinct schools and movements are regarded as “passive” participants, whose functions were related to reflection of historical events, their conceptualization and structurization, to the determination of the logic of narrative which enabled the society to fully grasp the subject matter. Political functionality came to the fore of medieval historiography, and in the early modern times it could take the form of propaganda. Consequently, the content of the narratives — evaluation of certain figures, events and phenomena by their authors, their perception of reality in general — is of utmost importance in A. Gransden’s book, shaping its core.

¹ Gransden A. *Historical Writing in England, c.550–1307*. London, 1974; Gransden A. *Historical Writing in England, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century*. London, 1982.

An opposing approach, which shifts the attention from the content of the narrative to its formal structure, is represented by such outstanding scholars as M. Clanchy² and B. Guenée³. They focused on the mechanisms of creating narratives, their genre specificity, inner structure, the role of historiography within intellectual space and its social functions.

The collection “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500”⁴ to a large extent follows the tradition of studying perceptions of the past across long historical periods, combining it with innovative approaches of participants of the projects. The authors faced a formidable challenge: on the one hand, they had to offer a comprehensive picture of the evolution of medieval historiography, on the other hand — to overcome limitations of the conventional chronological model of examining historical narratives.

Undoubtedly, the novelty of the collection lies in the pan-British context of its approach to historiography. Thus “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” continues the contemporary trend of viewing the British Isles as a distinct historical and cultural region within which the combination of disintegrating factors (diversity of political forms, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, irregularity of continental influences) and unifying factors (ethnogenetic and dynastic myths, the concept of pan-British leadership, means of social and power interactions) determined the specificity of the development compared to the continental variant⁵. A considerable contribution to the perceptions of “Pax Britannica” was made by R. R. Davies in his works on the basis of classic Middle Ages⁶, and by J. Morrill — on the basis of the early modern times⁷.

The rejection of Anglocentric model of approaching the history and culture of the British Isles leads to the reconsideration of the “British periphery”: it ceases to be regarded as such, and the texts created there are no longer considered “inferior” to English or “different” from “standard English variant”⁸. The editors and authors of the collection “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” have also managed to avoid another extremity — autonomization of Celtic historiographical layer. It encompassed vernacular Irish and Welsh narratives marked not only by their languages, but also by a particular role of historical texts in maintaining the structure of commemorative practices of Celtic societies⁹. In addition to special chapters devoted to historiography of Celtic regions (Ireland, Scotland and Wales)¹⁰, a number of other sections treat Celtic and Germanic components as complementary.

² Clanchy M. T. *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*. London, 1979.

³ Guenée B. *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, 1980.

⁴ *Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500* / J. Jahner, E. Steiner, E. M. Tyler (eds). Cambridge, 2019.

⁵ Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. *Antikvarnyi diskurs v rannestiuartovskoi Anglii*. St. Petersburg, 2013; Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. *Parliamentary Protestations and Political Culture in Revolutionary England* // *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*. 2017. Vol. 62, no. 3. P. 655–660.

⁶ Davies R. R. *The British Isles 1100–1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections*. Edinburgh, 1998.

⁷ Morrill J. *The British Problem, 1534–1707* // *State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*. Basingstoke, 1996. P. 1–38.

⁸ Fyodorov S. E. *Imperskaia ideia i monarkhii k iskhodu srednikh vekov* // *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*. 2013. No. 1. P. 77–89.

⁹ See: *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* / ed. by H. Pryce. Cambridge, 1998.

¹⁰ Jones O. W. *Historical writing in Medieval Wales* // *Medieval Historical Writing...* P. 208–224; Ash-Irisarri K. *Scotland and Anglo-Saxon Border Writing* // *Medieval Historical Writing...* P. 225–243.

Undeniably, the diversity of historical narratives forms the foundation for emergence of “Pax Britannica” as a single cultural and historical space. Their impact on shaping culture is realized at three levels. The first level is a common cultural substrate (integrating and appropriating texts whose plots are connected with the most archaic aspects of historical culture of Great Britain). The second level, at which historical narratives function, pertains to the phenomenon of regionalization and development of stable ethno-territorial entities — counties and kingdoms. At this level, narratives serve a disintegrating role, re-actualizing and re-interpreting certain elements of the earlier unifying complex. Finally, the third level comes to the fore during late Middle Ages and early modern times when integrating narratives centering around events relevant to the whole British Isles (supercession of dynasties, usurpation of the throne, The Wars of Roses, The Hundred Years Wars, The Reformation etc.) can take the form of propaganda.

The intention of the collection is succinctly defined by its editors, “Like the medieval histories that comprise its subject, this volume seeks to give a shape — or many shapes — to the past”¹¹. The book is made up of twenty seven chapters grouped in four sections: “Time”, “Place”, “Practice”, and “Genre”. At the same time, chronology is not abandoned, which enables the reader to get acquainted with early medieval narratives starting from Gildas the Wise; with historiography of the classic Middle Ages — in its representative texts (urban chronicles and “Chronica Majora” by Matthew Paris as well as polemical texts of the period of the Wars of Roses).

Time, place, practice and genre not only underscore the themes of each section but also, according to the editors of the collection, become the categories which define the specificity of the reception of historical content by the authors, on the one hand, and on the other hand — by their audience. “Histories are both products and producers”¹² of the period, place and events which they undertake to describe.

One of the evident merits of the collection lies in the fact that its authors do not confine themselves to examination of narratives regarded as purely historical (annals, chronicles, histories, and various compendiums and compilations) but extend the sphere of historical knowledge to texts which are not often studied within the context of “history writing”. Therefore, they succeed in overcoming the paradigm of perception of “historical” determined back in the IV century by Eusebius of Caesarea and relevant today to a certain extent.

It is thanks to the inclusion in the project of these “non-historical texts” that the phenomenon of the historical consciousness of medieval man acquires proper depth and dimensions. The range of “para-historical” narratives (which can feature both as independent texts and as elements of more voluminous narratives) is represented by genealogies (chapter by M. Turner); apocalypses (R. Emmerson); fictional histories (chapters by Th. Pendergast, J. Rajsic and R. Rouse); saints’ lives (C. Sanok); administrative records (A. Prescott).

The forms of the past discussed in the introduction are also forms of consciousnesses of creators and consumers of historical culture, temporal perceptions expressed in a wide variety of textual and material sources. As it is stressed in the introduction, the expansion of the spectrum of narratives enables to consider the phenomenon of historical consciousness from new “disciplinary perspectives, including political and legal history, literary his-

¹¹ *Jahner J., Steiner E., Tyler E. M.* General Introduction // *Medieval Historical Writing...* P. 1.

¹² *Ibid.* P. 9.

tory, art history, religious studies, codicology, the history of emotions, gender studies, and critical race theory”¹³.

In the chapters of the first section “Time”, temporal problems prevail, which are connected with the analysis of the processes of determination of chronology and selection of events by the medieval authors to establish the foundation of the framework for the history of peoples inhabiting the British Isles. It is a well-known and justified statement that the notion of time in the culture of Christian Middle Ages was linear and directional, and the mere time existed between the creation of material world and its end at the moment of Second Coming of Jesus Christ. As far as general theological and philosophical levels are concerned, this statement holds true; however, the chapters of the section demonstrate that concretization of the problems of chronology on the basis of the British material makes temporal structures more complex and multidimensional. M. Coumet shows that even Gildas is involved in overcoming the challenge of “triumphal narrative”, and T. O’Donnell points out how multifaceted structures of memory in monastic communities are built from personal memories, memories of the world, memories of the community, local and regional memories of the neighborhood. R. Emmerson demonstrates “that the basic structures of universal history are inherently apocalyptic and that apocalyptic texts often draw on historical structures to set forth their prophetic vision of the future”¹⁴. M. Turner explores the issue of inclusion of alien elements, namely genealogies, into historical narratives organized in accordance with chronological succession. The example of genealogies shows how these inserted elements become mechanisms of coping with discontinuity (which was invariably actual for the history of Britain, which until the early modern times had been seen as a succession of invasions). Historical continuity is addressed by C. Turner Camp — in connection with the historical and cultural gap between Anglo-Saxon and Norman England in the texts by contemporaries and perception of Anglo-Saxon past as “prehistory” to Norman and post-Norman kingdom¹⁵. Temporal problems acquire ethic connotations with emergence of the myth about holy and wise rule of Anglo-Saxon kings-lawmakers in the late Middle Ages.

The second section — “Place” — adds spatial dimension to temporal layer of historical narratives, which allows for treating narratives as “spatial practice”¹⁶. S. Foot brings up the aspect, which is probably central to understanding the specificity of insular culture, — reproduction of ancient notions of Britain as periphery of Europe in British narratives, a distinct liminal space. Descriptions of historical events complemented with mind maps created by the authors, focus of the narratives on concrete and significant geographical objects enable to trace meaningful continuity in the history of Britain. As the space is filled with relevant events, the perception of the British Isles as periphery is offset, and the tendency to consider events within the common British context (P. Gazzoli examines Scandinavian expansion and its impact on historiography) gives rise to re-structurization of insular ethno-territorial and ethno-cultural space (south-north) and provides an opportunity for integration of elements of Scandinavian culture “peripheral” in relation

¹³ *Jahner J., Steiner E., Tyler E. M. General Introduction // Medieval Historical Writing... P. 1.*

¹⁴ *Emmerson R. K. Apocalypse and/as History // Medieval Historical Writing... P. 66.*

¹⁵ *Palamarchuk A. A. Scandinavian Component in Anglo-Saxon and Norman Identities // Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History. 2020. Vol. 65, issue 3. P. 1016–1023.*

¹⁶ *Foot S. Mental Maps: Sense of Place in Medieval British Historical Writing // Medieval Historical Writing... P. 141.*

to England. E. M. Tyler examines another aspect of regional interactions — how practices and content of historical narratives in “Anglo-Saxon Chronicle” reflected cross-channel networks, and how this chronicle considerably impacted historiography and the genre of the novel in France.

The chapter by K. Lowe presents the category of “place” outside the context of the narratives per se as it deals with functioning of archives of classic Middle Ages as the space of accumulation, preservation and systematization of documents. This is noteworthy as some documents, first and foremost — documents of court proceedings and charters affirming property rights, were later included in the texts of histories and chronicles. The institutional history of the archive in Bury St Edmunds demonstrates particular mechanisms of practical use of historical memory fixed in documents in political, social and inter-institutional conflicts. A. Prescott, whose essay is also devoted to archives of classic medieval period, but within the section “Practice”, defines them as a “zone of paradox and conflict”¹⁷ as archives, whose creation was stimulated by ecclesiastical or secular power, kept testimonies of common people whose voices are otherwise absent. The chapter by O. Wyn Jones and H. Pryce provides the reader with the insight into the specificity of Welsh historiography where the boundaries between “history” and “literature” were vague. The authors reasonably emphasize the interpretation in the Welsh history-writing of the narratives which were actively exploited in post-Norman England, starting from Geoffrey of Monmouth. These concerned deeds of Brutus (J. Rajsic analyzes this plot on the basis of the English material).

K. Ash-Irisarri addresses the process of autonomization of Scottish historiography, the phenomenon of “border narrative”, and very controversial aspect of perception of Scottish chronicles as “national”¹⁸. London urban chronicles examined by G. Shuffelton constitute another example of consistent and conscious fragmentation of space, in this case — determined by formation of city corporate consciousness. However, Ch. F. Briggs referring to the example of intellectuals, members of mendicant and monastic orders who received a university education, illustrates a paradox: historical texts were actively disseminated in university circles but were not produced there. It should be noted that first “corporate” histories of English universities were created only in the 17th century.

The third section of the collection “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” is devoted to historiography as practice. Quite well-researched problems of compilation of texts (selection of sources, techniques of compilation) remain outside the scope of the section whose chapters are united by the approach to history-writing as “communal enterprise” and “communal experience”¹⁹. We regard this approach not only as innovative (even nowadays, the majority of researches into intellectual history of Middle Ages concentrate on personal contributions of individual authors and their individual experience) but also as justifiable since Middle Ages were the epoch not of individual but of community. The essay by K. Simms acquaints the reader with collective forms of transmission of historical knowledge in parish and secular schools and with the establishment by the XIII century of the professional community of *senchaide*, or “guardians of tradition”, as a separate group within a wider circle of *fili*.

¹⁷ Prescott A. Tall Tales from the Archive // Medieval Historical Writing... P. 369.

¹⁸ Fyodorov S. E., Palamarchuk A. A. Srednevekovaia Shotlandiia. St. Petersburg, 2014.

¹⁹ Weiler B. Historical Writing in Medieval Britain: The Case of Matthew Paris // Medieval Historical Writing... P. 323.

For B. Weiler, the process of creating and using of one of the most monumental historical text of the English classic Middle Ages — *Chronica Majora* — was determined first and foremost by devotional and didactic practice of the monastic community and was the outcome of both the individual effort of its creator and collective experience. M. Fisher и A. S. G. Edwards in their essays discuss the change in the means of transmission of historical information brought about by vernacularization and spread of book-printing during the late medieval period.

The collection is concluded by the section “Genre”. It is comprised by the chapters on late Middle Ages whose unity is achieved by the idea of blurring or transforming of boundaries between the “classic” genres of historical narratives. The “fluidity” of genres in the late medieval period is understood as a mechanism of adaptation of topical information about wars and conflicts to different audiences. Four chapters of the section provide the reader with the notion of genre-crossing between history and novel (R. Rouse); historization of hagiography (C. Sanok); transformation of history into dramatic tragedy (Th. A. Prendergast). Of utmost importance is the chapter by A. Hiatt “Forgery as Historiography”²⁰, in which the phenomenon of forged documents serves as a springboard for considering wider issues of perception of “true” and “false” in the medieval historical consciousness.

The last two chapters of the collection are devoted to the epoch of the crisis of the XIV–XV centuries known as the Wars of Roses. Modern historiography no longer regards crises of the period in question as indication of the decline of medieval statehood. The directions in state management outlined by the House of Lancaster were continued by the Tudors until they reached their logical limits, whereas the crisis became a stimulus for the monarchy’s search of new means of dialogue with the society²¹. This is the framework for one of the most successful chapter in the collection, in our opinion, — that by S. L. Peverley. In addition to well-known texts (John Hardyng’s *Chronicles*, John Rous’s *Historia Regum Angliae* etc.) it frees space for the voices of authors of lesser narratives and para-historical texts (for example, genealogical rolls). This chapter defines a polemical narrative as a new form of historiography with distinct combination of “detailed personal observation with clear political flexibility”²². A. Galloway in his chapter on the problem of the national in narratives of the XIV century treats political crisis similarly — as an impetus for reflection on the national; political instability stimulated authors to seek ways for unity. Undoubtedly, the thesis of the formation of the notion of “national” and “idea of the English nation” in relation to the XIV century raises objections although the author moderates it by admission of “increasing variety and complexity of social visions in general, including ideas of the realm”²³.

The collection “Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500” is a conceptually integral and multidimensional research, each section of which provides food for thought.

²⁰ About the “culture of forgeries” in medieval England from the Norman conquest on, see: *Hiatt A. The making of Medieval Forgeries: False Documents in Fifteenth-Century England*. Toronto, 2004.

²¹ *Pollard A. J. The Wars of the Roses*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

²² *Peverley S. L. Polemical History and the Wars of the Roses // Medieval Historical Writing...* P. 468.

²³ *Galloway A. Crisis and Nation in Fourteenth-Century English Chronicles // Medieval Historical Writing...* P. 466.

References

- Clanchy M. T. *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*. London, Edward Arnold, 1979, 330 p.
- Davies R. R. *The British Isles 1100–1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections*. Edinburgh, John Donald Publ., 1998, 159 p.
- Fyodorov S. E. Imperskaia ideia i monarkhii k iskhodu Srednikh vekov. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2013, issue 1, pp.77–89. (In Russian)
- Fyodorov S. E., Palamarchuk A. A. *Srednevekovaia Shotlandiia*. St. Petersburg, Aleteiia Publ., 2014, 352 p. (In Russian)
- Gransden A. *Historical Writing in England, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century*. London, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1982, 644 p.
- Gransden A. *Historical Writing in England, c. 550–1307*. London, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1974, 610 p.
- Guenée B. *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, Aubier, 1980, 439 p.
- Hiatt A. *The making of Medieval Forgeries: False Documents in Fifteenth-Century England*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, 226 p.
- Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*. Ed. by H. Pryce. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 314 p.
- Medieval Historical Writing. Britain and Ireland, 500–1500*. Eds J. Jahner, E. Steiner, E. M. Tyler. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 581 p.
- Morrill J. The British Problem, 1534–1707. *State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*. Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1996, pp. 1–38.
- Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. *Antikvarnyi diskurs v rannestiuartovskoi Anglii*. St. Petersburg, Aleteiia Publ., 2013, 211 p. (In Russian)
- Palamarchuk A. A., Fyodorov S. E. Parliamentary protestations and political culture in revolutionary England. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2017, vol. 62, issue 3, pp. 655–660.
- Palamarchuk A. A. Scandinavian Component in Anglo-Saxon and Norman Identities. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2020, vol. 65, issue 3, pp. 1016–1023.
- Pollard A. J. *The Wars of the Roses*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 200 p.

Статья поступила в редакцию 10 мая 2021 г.

Рекомендована в печать 14 сентября 2021 г.

Received: May 10, 2021

Accepted: September 14, 2021