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## **A Comparative Study of Contemporary Scholars' Views on Medieval European Science**

**Chong Jaw Chung\***  
**Open University Malaysia**

**\*Corresponding Author: [chongchung4526@oum.edu.my](mailto:chongchung4526@oum.edu.my)**

### **Abstract**

This research paper investigates how medieval science has been evaluated in modern historical scholarship and its place within the broader development of scientific knowledge. Earlier historical narratives often characterized the European Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages”. They supported the discontinuity thesis, which argued that medieval thought lacked relevance to the rise of modern science. Such interpretations reduced the period to intellectual stagnation and ignored its contributions. In response, this study reviews the work of post-World War II historians who redefined medieval science and laid the foundation for the continuity thesis. The research goal is to examine how contemporary scholarship interprets the intellectual role of medieval Europe, particularly through the study of universities, scholasticism, and natural philosophy. The findings indicate that most historians now reject the notion that medieval Europe was scientifically stagnant and instead recognize its intellectual significance and long-term influence. The study concludes that the continuity thesis offers a more accurate framework, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary and global perspectives in future research on medieval science and its connection to the Scientific Revolution.

**Keywords:** Medieval science, Continuity Thesis, Discontinuity Thesis, Scholasticism, Scientific Knowledge, Theology, Natural Philosophy.

## **Introduction and background**

The history of medieval science has long been a subject of intense debate among Historians. Traditionally, medieval Europe was considered the “Dark Ages,” a period assumed to be intellectually stagnant and hostile to scientific inquiry. This conventional view was shaped by the discontinuous or conflict thesis, which portrayed the relationship between science and religion as in conflict. Prominent scholars, who support it, such as John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White, reinforced the idea in works like *History of the Warfare between Science and Theology in Christendom*, presenting the Church as a systematic opponent of scientific progress (Harrison & Numbers, 2022). The Galileo Affair and the Condemnation by the Catholic Church were often portrayed as concrete examples of institutional repression of science (Henry, 2021). Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire further propagated this narrative to reinforce the notion of medieval backwardness. Later, the framework found partial support in Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shift model, which emphasized the overthrow of old worldviews and their replacement with new scientific paradigms, reinforcing the idea of a sharp break between medieval thought and early modern science (Qidwai, 2024). Within this historiographical tradition, medieval Europe was portrayed as a stagnant era, with actual scientific progress said to have leapt directly from ancient Greece to the early modern period, leaving the Middle Ages as a period of scientific stagnation. Under this interpretation, science was preserved and advanced within Islamic civilizations, with Europe playing a relatively minor role until the Renaissance (Grant, 2020).

In contrast, the continuity thesis presents a very different interpretation of the history of science. This perspective, proposed and articulated by Pierre Duhem in what is now known as the Duhemian Thesis, rejected the image of medieval Europe as a scientifically stagnant era. In works such as *Le Système du Monde (Cosmology of the World)*, Duhem uncovered a wealth of forgotten manuscripts and intellectual contributions from theologian-natural philosophers, including figures like William of Ockham and Thomas Aquinas. He demonstrated that medieval thinkers were not passive preservers of ancient knowledge but active contributors to the development of natural philosophy and astronomy (Henry, 2021). For Duhem, scholasticism played a crucial role in laying the intellectual groundwork for the Scientific Revolution, and the supposed break was instead a gradual transformation rooted in medieval traditions (Falk, 2020). The Duhemian thesis not only challenged the conflict narrative but also emphasized the importance of theology and philosophy in shaping the foundations of modern science (Lindberg, 2022).

The problem, however, is that contemporary scholars remain divided in their interpretations of medieval science. While some Duhem supporters emphasize the intellectual significance of the medieval period, others maintain aspects of the conflict narrative or reinterpret it in new ways, ignoring the complexity of the historiography of science (Hannam, 2021). To answer it, the present research conducts a comparative study of the perspectives of foremost contemporary historians of science on medieval intellectual life, to clarify how different methodological approaches and historiographical traditions shape our understanding of the medieval contribution to science. In doing so, some questions need answers, such as how contemporary scholars interpret the development of medieval science. What similarities and differences emerge between their perspectives? Moreover, what implications does this have for our broader understanding of the Scientific Revolution? These inquiries help modern society understand better the state of current scholarship within the context of intellectual history.

## Literature Review

After the Second World War, the study of medieval science went through a period of change and growth. Earlier, many writers described the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages,” when science was said to be suppressed by religion and little progress was made. However, between the 1940s and 1980s, historians began to study medieval science more carefully. They used sources, developed better historical methods, and gave more balanced views. Instead of viewing medieval science as a stagnant period, they demonstrated that it was marked by significant debates, institutions, and discoveries that laid the groundwork for later scientific developments. Important figures from this period include George Sarton, Frederick Copleston, Anneliese Maier, Marshall Clagett, Alistair Crombie, and Marie Boas Hall. Their work opened the door for later historians such as Edward Grant and David Lindberg, who developed even stronger arguments for continuity between medieval and modern science.

George Sarton (1927–1948), often called the father of modern history of science, was one of the first to build the field into a professional discipline. His *Introduction to the History of Science* and his work as editor of *Isis*, the leading journal in the field, created a foundation for serious academic study. Sarton looked at science as a story of progress over a long period, where knowledge moved from Greece to the Islamic world and then into medieval Europe. He showed that medieval thinkers kept ancient knowledge alive and developed it further. This helped challenge the idea that the Middle Ages were only an era of ignorance. However, Sarton’s history often presented science as a straight path leading to modern times, which gave less attention to the special details of medieval intellectual debates. Even so, his influence was huge because he made medieval science part of the larger story of world science.

Frederick Copleston (1946–1975) made another significant contribution in his *History of Philosophy*. His work focused on philosophy and theology, but he explained how scholastic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham shaped the way people thought about nature and reality. Copleston helped show that scholastic thinkers were serious intellectuals, not enemies of science. His writing made clear that philosophy and theology provided the framework in which medieval

science developed. Although Copleston paid less attention to mathematics or astronomy, he helped readers see that philosophy was a key partner of science in the medieval period. His work encouraged others to look more closely at how ideas about logic, metaphysics, and causation influenced the way natural philosophy grew in the Middle Ages.

Anneliese Maier (1949–1958) focused on scholastic natural philosophy with meticulous research. She studied Medieval Latin texts and examined concepts such as nature, motion, and cause. Her research showed that medieval debates were complex and creative, and that they prepared the ground for ideas later used in the Scientific Revolution. Maier gave strong evidence that the Middle Ages were not empty of science but were full of discussions that changed the way people thought about nature. Her work was very detailed and based on close reading of manuscripts, but it did not always explain the wider cultural or institutional setting. Still, Maier demonstrated that medieval intellectual life was far from stagnant and provided later historians with a strong foundation for studying scholastic thought.

Marshall Clagett (1959–1999), working in the United States, made another significant contribution. He studied medieval mathematics, astronomy, and mechanics, and he translated many important texts so that more scholars could read them. Clagett showed that medieval scholars worked with technical problems in serious and advanced ways, and their studies influenced later science in mechanics and astronomy. His focus on technical details gave a new respect to medieval science as exact and logical. However, Clagett gave less attention to the role of religion, institutions, or society in shaping this science. Even so, his work made it clear that medieval technical sciences were both advanced and worthy of study, and his translations remain useful for researchers today.

Alistair Crombie (1952) added another perspective in his book *Augustine to Galileo*. Crombie stressed that medieval universities trained scholars in methods of logic, disputation, and systematic reasoning, and these methods later shaped the work of early modern scientists. He argued that there was continuity between medieval scholastic practices and the development of the scientific method. This view opposed the idea of a sharp break between the Middle Ages and the Scientific Revolution.

Crombie's strength was showing how the medieval university system itself created habits of careful reasoning and cumulative knowledge. However, some critics felt he made medieval methods look too similar to modern science, which may risk oversimplifying them. Even so, his argument was very influential and showed that institutions mattered in the growth of science.

Marie Boas Hall (1962) studied the period of the Scientific Renaissance, from 1450 to 1630, but she also linked this later period back to medieval traditions. In her book *The Scientific Renaissance*, she explained how many ideas of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers were built upon scholastic debates from the Middle Ages. Her work stressed that the Scientific Revolution was not a sudden break but a development built upon medieval thought. While she focused more on early modern science, she reminded readers that medieval philosophy and science played an important role in shaping it. Her work helped create a bridge in historiography between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Together, these post-war scholars changed the way medieval science was understood. Instead of describing it as an age of darkness and scientific stagnancy, they showed that it was full of intellectual debates, detailed studies, and important achievements. At the same time, each scholar had a different focus: Sarton gave a broad overview, Copleston looked at philosophy, Maier studied concepts, Clagett explained mathematics and mechanics, Crombie highlighted method and institutions, and Hall examined the transition to early modern science. Their research helped establish the continuity thesis, but they also left some gaps. They paid less attention to the role of experiments, instruments, and crafts, and they often focused mainly on European thinkers without fully integrating Islamic, Jewish, or Byzantine contributions. Even so, their combined work created a strong foundation for later historians who developed more complete studies of medieval science.

## Contemporary Scholar's Perspective

Edward Grant is one of the most important scholars in the modern study of medieval science. In works such as *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (1996), *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (2001), and *A History of Natural Philosophy: from the Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century* (2007), he argued that medieval Europe laid the intellectual groundwork for modern science. For Grant, the medieval university was the main framework where natural philosophy was studied and transmitted. Scholastic logic, disputation, and Aristotelian philosophy shaped the disciplined methodology of reasoning about nature. These methods were not yet modern science, but they gave early modern figures like Galileo and Kepler the tools to create new theories. Grant emphasized that religion, theology, and natural philosophy were not obstacles but partners in shaping the conditions for later scientific growth.

David Lindberg also provided a balanced and careful perspective on medieval science. His best-known work is *The Beginnings of Western Science* (2007), where he explained the complexity of science in the Middle Ages. He also co-edited *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (1986) and, with Michael Shank, *the Cambridge History of Science, Volume 2: Medieval Science* (2013). These later works demonstrated how medieval science evolved through the transmission of Greek learning into the Islamic world and subsequently into Latin Christian Europe. Lindberg emphasized that Christianity and science were often compatible, since many scholars saw the study of nature as a way to understand God's creation. His work emphasized continuity, adaptation, and translation as key parameters that enabled medieval science to lay the groundwork for the Scientific Revolution.

Peter Harrison provided another perspective, focusing on how theological change shaped the rise of modern science. His early book, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (1998), was followed by *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (2007) and *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015). In these works, he argued that medieval scholastic traditions gave important resources, but it was the religious changes of the Reformation that reshaped how people studied

nature. Harrison demonstrated that new approaches to reading the Bible and innovative ideas about human nature contributed to a paradigm shift in the early modern period. For him, theology did not hinder science; instead, it transformed the questions people asked about the natural world and provided the intellectual framework for modern science to flourish.

John Henry has also written extensively on science and religion, and is highly critical of the old conflict thesis. His book *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science* (2008) remains a standard intellectual text. He also published *Religion and the Scientific Revolution* (2002) and *Knowledge is Power* (2002). In these studies, Henry argued that theology and natural philosophy were deeply connected. He emphasized the need to see science in its historical context, where religion, philosophy, and natural philosophy interacted closely—for Henry, natural philosophy and theology often acted together as driving forces in early modern science, especially in shaping ideas of natural law and divine order.

William A. Wallace made an exceptional contribution by studying scholastic logic and Aristotelianism, which helped shape scientific thought. In *Prelude to Galileo* (1981) and *Galileo and His Sources: The Heritage of the Collegio Romano in Galileo's Science* (1984), he showed how Galileo's intellectual background was rooted in scholastic traditions. His latest book, *The Modeling of Nature* (2004), explained how Aristotelian philosophy created categories of thought that were later adapted into scientific theories. Wallace emphasized that medieval philosophy, theology, and natural philosophy created continuity between the Middle Ages and the early modern period. His research revealed that the medieval intellectual tradition had a profound influence on Galileo and other early scientists.

George Saliba contributed important research on Islamic science and its influence on Europe. His most influential book, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (2007), argued that Islamic scholars did not merely preserve Greek science but developed new methods and models in astronomy and mathematics. European scholars then adopted these innovations through translation and adaptation. Saliba highlighted parameters such as cross-cultural transmission, mathematical modeling, and the integration of astronomical systems, all of which shaped Medieval

Latin science. His work reminds historians that European science cannot be studied in isolation but must be seen as part of a wider global tradition, especially the parameter of Greco-Arabic translation in medieval intellectual history.

James Hannam took a different approach, writing for both academic and public audiences. His book, *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science* (2009), argued that the Middle Ages were not a time of darkness and scientific stagnation, but rather a period of genuine scientific progress. Hannam highlighted medieval thinkers such as Jean Buridan and Nicole Oresme, who developed important ideas in mechanics and astronomy. He showed that theology and natural philosophy encouraged curiosity about nature and created a framework for studying it. While Hannam has not published a new monograph after 2020, his book remains widely read and continues to shape how the public and scholars view medieval science as a stage of progress rather than stagnation.

Most recently, Seb Falk has contributed to this debate with *The Light Ages: a Medieval Journey of Discovery* (2020). Falk uses the story of a fourteenth-century English monk, John of Westwyk, to show how astronomy, timekeeping, and education flourished in medieval Europe. His book is important because it brings together detailed archival research with a clear narrative style that reaches broader audiences. Falk argues that medieval science was not only alive but also central to European culture, with monasteries and universities acting as creative centers of knowledge. His work reflects the most recent trend in scholarship, which emphasizes micro-histories, everyday practices, and the lived experience of science in the medieval world.

Taken together, these contemporary scholars provide a rich set of perspectives on medieval science. Grant, Lindberg, Wallace, and Hannam emphasize the intellectual vitality of scholastic institutions, theology, and natural philosophy, showing how they laid the foundations for modern science. Harrison and Henry stress the importance of theological change and contextual interactions in shaping scientific ideas during the early modern period. Saliba broadens the field by reminding us of the crucial role of Islamic scholars and the transmission of their ideas to Europe. At

the same time, Falk represents the newest scholarship, focusing on how medieval science was cultivated in daily life, education, and practice. Despite their different emphases, all these scholars reject the “Dark Ages” myth and agree that religion, theology, and natural philosophy were central parameters in the growth of medieval science and its impact on the Scientific Revolution during the early modern era.

### **Comparative Analysis and Discussions**

When comparing the views of contemporary scholars, some clear points of agreement appear. Almost all of them reject the old idea of the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages” where science was stagnant. Instead, they agree that medieval science was active and important for the development of early modern science. Edward Grant, David Lindberg, William Wallace, and James Hannam emphasize that medieval universities, scholastic philosophy, and theological debates created the intellectual tools for later scientific progress (Grant, 2020; Lindberg, 2022; Wallace, 2020; Hannam, 2021). Peter Harrison and John Henry likewise argue that science and religion were not always in conflict, but often worked together (Harrison, 2022; Henry, 2021). George Saliba and Seb Falk also support this general agreement. However, they remind us that medieval science must be viewed as part of a broader cultural narrative, encompassing Islamic scholarship and the daily lives of European scholars (Saliba, 2020; Falk, 2020). In this sense, all of these writers agree that the Middle Ages must be taken seriously as a significant era in the history of science.

However, there are also points of disagreement. Grant and Wallace place a strong emphasis on continuity, demonstrating how scholastic logic and Aristotelian natural philosophy provided structure to early modern science (Grant, 2020; Wallace, 2020). In contrast, Harrison stresses that a major transformation occurred in the early modern era, particularly with the Reformation, when new ways of interpreting the Bible altered the way people approached nature (Harrison, 2022). Henry takes a middle position, showing that religion and natural philosophy were always connected, but he does not see medieval methods as simply continuous with modern science (Henry, 2021). Saliba emphasizes that many of the real innovations came from Islamic scholars, while Hannam insists that medieval Europe itself had strong traditions of science (Saliba, 2020;

Hannam, 2021). Falk, meanwhile, focuses on micro-histories, showing the lives of ordinary scholars to prove that medieval science was alive in practice as well as in theory (Falk, 2020). These differences show that while there is broad agreement on the importance of the Middle Ages, there is no single interpretation of how exactly medieval science led to modern science.

Case examples help to make these similarities and differences clearer. William of Ockham is often discussed as a thinker who used logic and philosophy in ways that shaped later ideas of empiricism and simplicity in science. For some, Ockham and other scholastics were part of the intellectual training that gave structure to modern science (Grant, 2020; Wallace, 2020). Universities are another case: disputations and commentaries created a methodology of systematic reasoning that helped early modern scientists like Galileo (Crombie, 2020; Lindberg, 2022). Astronomy also shows different perspectives. Islamic astronomy gave Europe advanced models and techniques, while monks in medieval England, like John of Westwyk, worked with instruments to keep time and study the heavens (Saliba, 2020; Falk, 2020). Theology is another central example. Biblical interpretation during the Reformation reshaped natural philosophy, while others have argued that theology and natural philosophy constantly interacted in both medieval and early modern times (Harrison, 2022; Henry, 2021). These examples show how different parameters, such as logic, universities, astronomy, and theology, shaped the debates about medieval science.

The implications for historiography are significant. The older conflict thesis, which claimed that science and religion were enemies, is now rejected by almost all contemporary scholars. The continuity thesis has been strengthened by historians of medieval universities and scholastic traditions, but with important modifications (Grant, 2020; Lindberg, 2022; Wallace, 2020). Others add nuance by showing that religious ideas sometimes transformed science rather than simply continuing it (Harrison, 2022; Henry, 2021). Some widen the frame by including Islamic science, while others deepen it by showing the daily practice of medieval scholars (Saliba, 2020; Falk, 2020). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that medieval science should not be viewed as a stagnant period in the history of science, but rather as a dynamic stage in the history of knowledge. The disagreements among them are not weaknesses but strengths, because they

help us understand the complexity of the past. The overall finding is clear: medieval science made fundamental contributions, and its study changes how we understand both the Middle Ages and the Scientific Revolution.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown the importance of looking carefully at the continuity thesis and the discontinuity thesis when studying medieval European science. The comparative approach highlights that the continuity theory gives a more complete understanding of how knowledge developed from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. While the discontinuity thesis, also known as the conflict thesis, once dominated older histories, it is now clear that it cannot fully explain the complex relationship between science, religion, and philosophy. Instead, more recent research supports the idea that there was no total break, but rather a long process of development and transformation. A significant finding of this study is that many contemporary scholars give strong support to the continuity thesis. The works of Edward Grant, David Lindberg, William Wallace, James Hannam, and Seb Falk all demonstrate that medieval intellectual life made lasting contributions to the rise of modern science, including the development of medieval universities, scholastic debates, and philosophical training as central frameworks for systematic thinking. By contrast, the discontinuity thesis has been shown to have serious weaknesses. It often portrayed the history of science as a story of conflict between science and religion, ignoring the cooperation that took place. It also overlooks the crucial role of institutions, translations, and intellectual traditions that have shaped scientific thought.

Another important conclusion is that more research is still needed to strengthen the continuity model. Although many valuable studies have been written, historians can continue to explore the connections between medieval philosophy, theology, and natural philosophy in even more detail. For example, digital access to manuscripts and new interdisciplinary approaches can open fresh perspectives. Comparative studies with Islamic, Jewish, and Byzantine traditions can also give a richer picture of how science developed globally, not just within Europe. This study also confirms that medieval Europe was not a stagnant era for science. Far from being a time of darkness, it provided the intellectual

foundations for later scientific breakthroughs. The rise of the university, the scholastic method of disputation, and the influence of Aristotelian philosophy gave structure and discipline to the study of nature. Within this setting, natural philosopher-theologians played a significant role in it. Thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham showed that theology and philosophy could shape new ways of understanding nature. Their ideas did not remain confined to the Middle Ages but continued to influence scientists in the early modern period, including Galileo, Newton, and Kepler.

In conclusion, the comparative study of continuity and discontinuity highlights that the history of medieval science must be seen as dynamic, complex, and creative. The evidence strongly supports the continuity thesis, while also reminding us that the debate between continuity and discontinuity has shaped how science is remembered. By recognizing the contributions of natural philosophers, theologians, and cross-cultural exchanges, historians can better understand how medieval thought prepared the foundation for the Scientific Revolution. This conclusion also gives direction to the importance of future research, which should continue to uncover the richness of medieval science and its crucial role in the long history of human knowledge.

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