

## The Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History 2004

*The work of Professor Jacques Le Goff presented by Professor Willem Frijhoff, Chair of the Jury of the Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History*

*Prize citation: for 'fundamentally changing our view of the Middle Ages'.*

Your Royal Highnesses,  
Your Excellencies  
Madam President De Carvalho,  
Members of the Board of the Heineken Foundations,  
Laureates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Mr Le Goff,

I am addressing you in the person of your son Thomas, who is representing you here.

You have been awarded the 2004 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History because, by transforming our view of the Middle Ages, you have changed the way we deal with history. You have a way of writing about history that combines a profound knowledge of the past with a keen eye for the needs of the present, which is seen as history in the making. Beyond your field of study, which continues to be medieval society and the men and women who fashioned it, you have developed a theoretical critique of the way in which the historian's creative work is accomplished as well as a sharp awareness of the bonds that link medieval society to the Europe of today and tomorrow. Through your academic work, your editorship of the influential journal *Annales* and your teaching, not to mention your untiring presence in the media and public debate, you have returned history to the forefront of the present. It is precisely your commitment to a better understood and better founded Europe which has made you an eminently deserving recipient of the Heineken Prize. By tirelessly disseminating a new image of the Middle Ages, you have made us understand the relevance of those Middle Ages to the Europe of today.

This is because your Middle Ages are not the dark and backward period which is portrayed in the stereotypical view. Quite the contrary, the Middle Ages were the birthplace of our institutions and values, our shared mentality and our entire culture. It was those Middle Ages that invented our view of time and our way of using it. They prepared the ground for the way we manage our money and make it grow. They created the modern merchant and the production methods that brought about the economic take-off of the West. Through the Church and its strategies of persuasion, they subdued the savage violence of ancient society and imposed social order. They started the conquest of the earth's space. Finally, they invented the intellectual, his concern to reshape society and his conviction that human beings are capable of creating their own future. All this you have clearly shown in a long series of books and articles, appearances in the media and audiovisual productions which have contributed to fundamentally changing our view of the past. And, fortunately, you have gained a following.

Mr Le Goff, your works have won many prizes. Your great work *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* (1964) is an undisputed classic, but so are your academic works, the essence of which is distilled in the collection of articles entitled *Pour un autre Moyen Age* (1977) and in the volumes devoted to defining a new history, *Nouvelle histoire* (1974, 1978). Your talents are many and varied. You are in no way a cloistered academic, locked up in an ivory tower. On the contrary, anyone who has had the privilege of meeting you will say how inspired they have been by your insatiable curiosity, which constantly opens up new horizons, new processes and new methods. Haven't you been affectionately dubbed "the gourmand historian"? You are an exceptional historian, through your prolific writings, the breadth of your vision and the meticulous way you approach your subject. Your argument that the concept of Purgatory was used for social, cultural and indeed political purposes was a sensation in 1982 and your biography of Saint Louis (1996) revived the genre. More recently still,

you tackled the history of the human body in the Middle Ages. Instead of focusing solidly on a single topic, you reveal a subject by examining it for the riches it can provide and finally anchoring it in an overall view of an age or a community. You continue to set the agenda for history with a remarkable shrewdness and a sustained presence in the public domain. And you have no fear of debate. You are also an European intellectual in the best sense of the term, engaged in the construction of a new European consciousness both based on your professional knowledge and as a clear-thinking citizen.

In your preface to *Faire de l'histoire* (Vol. I, 1974, p. xiii) you define the task of today's historian as follows: "the essential thing... is to be able to write the history that today needs. As the science of the mastery of the past and awareness of time, history must also be defined as the science of change and transformation". Your work therefore involves the historian's social responsibility. It is for this reason that the jury recognises you as one of the great European historians of our time. The profound resonances that your works continue to find across the intellectual world are brilliant proof of this.