

1. I deal with the logistical problem first by explaining to students that there is one—that it is impossible to deal adequately with the dizzying array of peoples and polities in the medieval Mediterranean. I tell the students about the region/s and issues I focus on in my research and then assure them that we will move far beyond my concerns and explore other regions and issues together. I condense Mediterranean history by focusing on a particular theme each week and choosing two or three representative examples that I treat in the weekly lectures as well as appropriate primary-source readings for discussion. By the end of the semester, we've covered quite a lot of ground, even if the coverage for one region or people is not continuous.
2. Yes, I think that some historiographical background is useful. It is good for students to see how and why the field has continually changed. I don't "teach against the canon" because I don't want to discourage students from later exploring, say, the history of medieval England in greater depth; nor do I want to create a new canon. What I try to do is to show the students how a shift in perspective—a view from the south and/or east, so to speak—can significantly alter the way we understand developments in the wider medieval world, south, north, east, and west.
3. I am well aware that many students enroll in the course because of "presentist" concerns. I see it less as a problem than as an opportunity. I address the matter from the outset and tell the students that if we are going to make this Mediterranean past useful for grappling meaningfully with contemporary issues, then we first must understand medieval people from their own perspective. This is where close analysis of primary sources come in. When students discuss issues like the history of Christian-Muslim-Jewish relations, contemporary concerns invariably arise, which is fine. Class discussions take on an exciting and instructive dialectical quality.