

Teaching the Medieval as Mediterranean: Reorienting the Metanarrative

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NB – these represent spontaneous single-draft responses to the round-table prompts.

1. The logistical challenges of teaching a course on the medieval Mediterranean

- **given that few of us were trained to do it all, we inevitably find ourselves teaching “out of field.” How do we manage that?**
- **given that there is so much material and so little time to present it, how do we condense it in ways that still give our students a meaningful sense of the whole?**

I think to some extent the challenge of intellectual logistics is one that can be met in part by adjusting our expectations as instructors, and resisting the impulse to try to “teach” or “cover” *everything*, which is simply impossible in a course which spans many centuries of history and endeavors to include not only African, European and West Asian cultures, peoples and polities, but also Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – as well as the interactions of all of these. Clearly, each of us likely going to emphasize whether consciously or not, that which we know best and are most comfortable with, and to steer away from or underplay unfamiliar topics. One way around this might be to focus on themes that are within our comfort zone, and spend a bit of time researching parallel or complementary phenomena in areas or cultures that we are less familiar with. And rather than getting stuck in the weeds, a way into this might be to seek out parallel primary sources. For example, an instructor who is confident in the chivalric culture of Latin Christendom might choose a short source excerpt that focuses clearly on this, and assign it alongside short excerpts from an Arabo-Islamic and a Byzantine chronicle. After “teaching” the Latin document in some detail, one could invite the students to read and draw comparisons or highlight differences they see in the other two examples. Clearly, this is best accomplished in a small class/discussion environment, but it with a larger class the same process (although with less interaction) can be tapped through the use of “response forms” (for example, using Google Forms). Given that semesters generally run for ten to fifteen weeks, this would likely not involve more than seven to ten of such intellectual excursions.

Now, these challenges are not unique to teaching Mediterranean history, of course. Those of us who have taught World History have faced similar, if not greater challenges, in terms both of the anxieties of teaching out of field, and the challenges of selection and condensation of material. Imagine the terror of a European medievalist having to lecture on and Korean or Chinese history and integrate into a cohesive narrative. I have lived that, and survived. The secret, really, I think is to de-emphasize events and concentrate on structures and processes. Doing so not only frees one from getting dragged into the minutiae, but enables one to starting building one’s own original synthesis. By structuring essay assignments or source assignments around themes and requiring students to take a comparative approach, provides an additional springboard for students to address areas or events that may not figure in the lecture component of the course.

As it is, these are, in fact, some the challenges that we set out to address in putting together *The Sea in the Middle* and *Documents in the Middle* – in that we endeavored to provide a basic frame-work both in terms of themes and historical narrative, so that an instructor whose specialization falls into one of the constituent cultural/geographic zones (e.g.: Latin West, Byzantium, Islamic World), would have enough, and just enough, to teach the course with confidence. Similarly, the structure of the readings and artifacts, which tend to be thematically-oriented and comparative, encourage both instructors and students to think along these lines.

2. The revisionism inherent in such a course may be lost on students who come with comparatively little previous exposure to the subject.

- **is it important that our students understand how medieval studies used to operate before it redefined itself as a Mediterranean field?**
- **do we need to teach some of the canon so that we can teach against it?**

When one is conscious of the revisionist nature of one's approach, it is indeed tempting to believe that one must sketch out the canonical narrative before setting out to nuance, or perhaps even demolish it. But having been teaching Mediterranean history for some time now, and specifically a course on Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in the eleventh- to thirteenth-centuries, I've come to the conclusion that this is largely unnecessary, and that the urge to do so is probably more a function of my own intellectual process than one that serves the students. To a certain extent this depends on one's constituency, in that students who come from particular educational or cultural backgrounds may arrive at the medieval Mediterranean with a certain amount of "baggage," in the sense that what they have learned or been taught before university may reflect or reinforce the narratives and historical perspectives that we might regard as obsolete and in need of revision. I have found, however, this to be relatively rare. This may be in part because high school curriculums have been gutted of historical content not relating to the US, and because generally young people may read less than we did (or think we did) when we were young. So there is a generational factor at work. However, I think the generational factor comes into play much more in the sense of what our students *do* know intuitively, as opposed to what they know through being taught.

Those of us who grew up in North America in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, grew up in a world and within a popular and learned culture in which whether explicitly or implicitly categories of ethnicity, race and religion were presented as the building blocks of society and history. Many of us grew up in social, cultural and intellectual environments that were unreflectively homogeneous, and had little exposure to "outside" cultures. The media was far more homogenous both in terms of message and aspect. There was no internet that enabled the most physically or geographically isolated individual to access other worlds, cultures and perspectives at the click of a mouse. And what schooling we got in history tended to inculcate with the creaky, stereotypical and Platonic perspectives of Anglo-European DWM history.

But our students are not us, and their world experience is often very different. True, some do grow up in cultural and intellectual silos, but even these tend to get exposed through popular culture to a world that is diverse and cosmopolitan. Many come from families that have immigrated not from Europe, but from all of the world – from locales and cultures that do not have *place* in the canonical narrative of the pre-Modern West. Many come from families that are multicultural and draw on multiple religious or ethnic cultures. What I have found is that the medieval that I describe, in which, for example, Christians, Muslims and Jews are not necessarily

implacable enemies, in which identity (whether ethnic, religious, or even gender) might be ambiguous, fluid or situational, is one which most of my students understand on an intuitive level because it reflects their own experiences and perspectives. That said, I have found it necessary to a certain degree to “run interference” against certain stereotypes that students might have absorbed through the popular media (many of which tend to revolve around the supposed “character of Islam”). But even these does not require teaching the canon to dismantle it, except perhaps in few exemplary cases, such as the Pirenne Thesis, or “Europe besieged by Islam” approach. All of that said, what I do find helpful at the beginning of a course is to engage the students with a critical discussion of terms that we often use to describe historical processes and to bring out the nuances, contradictions and ambiguities of these: concepts such as “East,” “West,” “Europe,” “Islamic world,” “nation,” “culture,” “religion,” “progress,” and so on. And this I do for the most part by asking them what these terms mean and getting them to reconsider their own definitions.

3. How should instructors navigate the “presentist” concerns that such a course is likely to inspire in its students, given its increased attention to ethnic/religious relations, colonialism, etc.?

- **how do we productively address these concerns without succumbing to anachronism or teleology?**
- **is a survey course on the medieval Mediterranean any less of a “civics lesson” (albeit with a different “moral” to the story) than the traditional survey on medieval Europe?**

These are important questions, and delicate ones. We should not understate or trivialize the very real suffering and trauma that individuals and communities underwent in the period. The historiographical/pedagogical tropes of the “clever/ opportunistic elite slave concubine” or the “powerful eunuch” are good examples of approaches that could use some nuancing (i.e.: think of the former rather on “Handmaid’s” terms and the latter as a child traumatically mutilated). On the other hand, one does not want to present a lachrymose history in which one focuses on the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population was vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse and lacked agency. Indeed, outside of our first-world socio-economically privileged bubbles, the same can be said not only of all historical periods but of our own present (think of the widespread durability of slavery and near-slavery, of genocide, and of exploitative labor practices). Bearing in mind human suffering is important, but focusing too closely on it distracts from the historical processes we want to teach, and there is a sort of “diminishing return” in over-emphasizing this.

Moreover, one has to keep in mind contemporary social and cultural expectations. In medieval Mediterranean societies slavery and violence were normalized to an extent that it is difficult for us to imagine; what we see as outrageous or oppressive, may not have appeared as such to people of the time. For example, religiously plural societies were structured on the assumption that there was a socio-economic-legal hierarchy that was determined by religious community. In Islamic societies, neither Christians nor Jews found the notion of their subjugation or secondary status to be outrageous; in fact, it aligned with their own expectations (which is not to say they necessarily liked it). The same can be said for Muslims and Jews who lived under Christian rule. There was an expectation that their treatment would not be arbitrary and would correspond to the established law, but there was no question of minority communities being “equal.” Similarly, “freedom” was not conceived of on terms of the individual’s right to

survival and self-determination (as we see it today), but rather on a religious community's right to survival and self-determination (which often implied the repression of individual rights).

Things get even more slippery and problematic when we apply categories such as religion, nation, and race to the medieval Mediterranean. To the extent that these concepts existed or can be observed, they thought of in a way very different from the way we think of them today. And one has to be very careful in deploying these terms, not to fall into a sort of modal slippage, in which modern conceptions are applied to medieval realities.

Perhaps the best way out of these traps – and this is what we have endeavored to do in *The Sea in the Middle* – is “present the facts,” warts’n’all, and let them speak for themselves. The job of the historian is to analyze, not moralize. By laying out a narrative based on a evidence that shows that Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and the various peoples of Africa, Europe and West Asia engaged with each other economically, socially, politically and intellectually in both conflict and collaboration speaks clearly to the diversity and complexity that has been whitewashed out of traditional narratives. When presented clearly and responsibly it stands on its own, and invites students to take their own “civic lessons” away from the course and to reflect on the assumptions they may have about how our societies and cultures emerged and function.

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