

## **AHA Roundtable Prompts: “Teaching the Medieval as Mediterranean: Reorienting the Metanarrative”**

### **Claire Gilbert Responses:**

#### **1. Confronting logistical challenges**

The logistical challenges of teaching any survey are immense, both in terms of the intellectual preparation of the professor, and facilitating meaningful student engagement with course content and materials. In my teaching over the past six years at Saint Louis University, I have been assigned more survey courses than any other kind of course, and so these challenges have been frequently top of my mind as I seek to invite primarily non-history students into complex and dynamic conversations, including many taking place far beyond my fields of specialization. Beyond the broad history surveys that are taught in the SLU core curriculum, however, in my undergraduate and graduate seminars related to medieval Mediterranean topics, I have found that analogous logistical challenges remain.

I find that one useful strategy (not one I am certainly not alone in employing) is to present course topics in terms of questions, so that the students come in to the lesson with a mindset of exploration and discovery. Since many of these topics are outside of my training and/or background, formulating the topic as a question also helps guide my preparation, and allows me to emphasize with the students (and remind myself) the contingency and incompleteness of historical knowledge.

For example, in Fall 2020 I co-taught an interdisciplinary upper-level class for History and Spanish students that I designed and implemented with a linguist colleague in our Spanish department (Dr. Sheri Anderson-Gutiérrez, a specialist in Second Language Acquisition). The course topic lies at the intersection of our research interest—The History of Language Sciences in Medieval Iberia—and each week was designed around a broad question which served to introduce students to course content from distinct disciplines and to invite those students to ask their own questions to connect what at first seemed like vastly different research propositions. Departing from questions like “What are and what were language sciences?” to “How did language sciences influence the Iberian Renaissance?” allowed us to present research frameworks, rather than rote material for memorization, which students were then tasked to read about, discuss, and formulate their own research questions to eventually carry out in final projects. Students shared with us at the end of the semester that they initially found the questions method intimidating and sometimes frustrating, but soon grew to appreciate the ownership and agency that the research-driven framework provided them. That said, in order to ensure that they were learning with our guidance and to minimize confusion in an especially overwhelming semester (Fall 2020), we had to make radical choices about what to include and how to present it, and our own takeaway after the semester was “Less is More” (when the “less” is carefully curated to open students to “more”).

For graduate students, the questioning approach can be no less useful. In my “Mediterranean History and the World” seminar, we depart from a litany of questions that will be familiar to many here: “What is the Mediterranean and what is its history? Over the past decades this deceptively simple question has yielded in response thousands of published pages across a range of disciplines, in addition to conferences, journals, scholarly associations, fellowships, even academic jobs. Is this Mediterranean, which has been so productive for scholars, a sea, a category of spatial connectivity, a geography, a frontier, a borderlands, a barrier, a setting for human activity, or a scholarly heuristic? What makes history of the Mediterranean different than history in the Mediterranean? Is the Mediterranean one or many? What are the limits of Mediterranean History?” Because of the composition of our department and graduate program, most students are working on topics connected to Mediterranean history, World History and the Atlantic World, so I have designed the class to use the Mediterranean as a laboratory from which to make productive comparisons and connections among these cohorts. One goal is to help students with research interests that fall within the medieval Mediterranean to think critically and productively about how frameworks of connectivity, fragmentation, plurality, and distinction can help them connect their research materials and questions to broader conversations while at the same time helping them focus their inquiry into their specific source base. For students whose research does not take them “in” to the Mediterranean, spending time in the Mediterranean “laboratory” of the class is meant to offer them points of comparison and connection as well as heuristic models for how to think about connectivity, fragmentation, plurality, and distinction in their own research fields. Finally, departing from this barrage of questions is meant to remind graduate students as much as undergraduates (and myself) that inquiry is an ongoing process, and that our results never final, however revealing they may be.

## **2. Presenting the stakes and significance of revisionism**

For me, this question is one of the most vital in my teaching so far at every level, and one which I believe with larger issues facing History as a university discipline. As university faculty members, we are charged with the creation of new knowledge—what our training and vocation has prepared us for—in our research and in our teaching. This doesn’t mean that every college freshman should be assigned a dissertation topic, of course, but I do see my role as the teacher of university students as that of a guide to a given field who equips the students with the tools, skills, and basic information they need to become self-sufficient learners in that field. That is, I want them to seek out information actively to draw conclusions and formulate additional lines of inquiry that may continue to gestate beyond the class, not receive course content passively so as to check it off an educational laundry list and move on. I believe this is a common goal that I share with many others.

In spite of these objectives, I often find myself trying to guide students toward intellectual frontiers of “new knowledge” (in the sense of knowledge they bring together by engaging with a range of sources previously unfamiliar to them) when they expect—even wish for—“old knowledge” (in the sense being presented with of a canon of received narratives and information that they plan to memorize and regurgitate). Happily, thanks to new

interdisciplinary approaches like Mediterranean studies which emphasize connection across difference (however defined), even canonical texts/narratives can be meaningfully reframed across a wider range of cultures by asking new questions of old texts and bringing new data to the fore.

In the case of my choices for the first part of our undergraduate world history survey, for several years now I've chosen to articulate the course around the question of the enduring popularity of adaptations of the Troy myth (from Homer to Camões) although my presentation of this complex topic is also piecemeal given the gaps in my own knowledge (see question 1). At least, however, this choice allows me to ground the class in the kinds of Mediterranean transmissions which are more closely connected to my research interests, and to explore Afro-Eurasian contact and circulation departing from those transmissions. A model for the kinds of questions and explorations I try to present to my students is Sharon Kinoshita's work on the "Mediterranean materiality" of medieval romances and epics. Based on her model, like her study of Boccaccio's *Alatiel*, I try to help my students perform this kind of literary-contextual reading on the various iterations of story of Troy and Trojans—in the Bronze age eastern Mediterranean, as a tool of Roman empire, as a topos of medieval Romance, as a political education for later Byzantine elites, and finally as a much-mediated model for Iberian trade and expansion in Africa and the Indian Ocean World. However, as an intro survey course, our time and tools are very limited, and I'm not sure how much success I've made in grounding students in Mediterranean history. I've thought about trying a similar approach with Alexander the Great, or merging the two, though both examples lead me straight into the issues presented about teaching (against) canon. To be sure, in addition to dynamism in our research fields, Mediterranean studies approaches can benefit us and our students in the classroom by expanding the potential to teach canonical narratives from a cross-cultural perspective, a perspective which amplifies the kinds of ideas and information that we can communicate to students. On the other hand, the point of departure and thus much of the framing of the intellectual journey can remain grounded in an origin story that hews very close to canonical Western Civ, as it has in my case.

### **3. Dealing constructively with presentism**

Another vital question! Like many other colleagues with whom I have discussed these issues, I have found that for students who have not cultivated an interest in history prior to our class, one of the first and most impactful ways for them to connect with course topics is to realize parallels with what they recognize as present concerns. This can be, I think, a productive point of entry for them to begin to historicize the present, in the sense that making such a connection at least asks students to realize that others may have experienced or observed complex issues as they themselves do. Nevertheless, it is also easy to stop at that observation of similarity—which is quite powerful and thus I think attractive—rather than investigating more deeply the distinct and complex contexts of the then and the now that might end up producing what to us seem like similar conditions or concerns. That is, we have to teach students to recognize such parallels and simultaneously to ask themselves what in their own experiences causes them to ascribe such parallels to historical information.

Indeed, we should not forget that there is a certain amount of presentism necessary for historical work in the sense that our questions and perspectives are inevitably influenced by the present—that is why understanding historiography is so vital as we continually seek accuracy and objectivity. Still—and as a recurring theme in this conversation—it seems to be too much to ask students to simultaneously learn and unlearn historiographic paradigms as we introduce new historical content (I don't think I could have done it in my first history classes!). Nevertheless, we can insist on the fact that new historical knowledge is being actively produced (by their professors; by them!) as we ask new questions, seek out new sources, and think critically about why and how we do both as part of a longer conversation across generations and cultures. Introducing them to the concept of this longer conversation may also help address the issues around how to present the stakes of revisionism about medieval history.

For me this question is deeply connected to my answers to question 2: how to persuade students that they are discovering something new and dynamic rather than encountering something old and static when learning about the past. The key here, I believe, is interrogating categories and labels, but also doing this in a manageable way for undergraduate students (also early graduate students). The seeming absence of fixed categories and labels can quickly become frustrating and overwhelming for new history students since they are also trying to master new knowledge and information.

A solution (as so often) lies in the sources, in juxtaposing the labels and categories they read in a textbook or hear in lectures with the labels and categories they find (or do not find) in primary sources. Then, we can introduce them to recent scholarship that is taking on the same kind of challenge (I'm thinking about Fred Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers* or Brian Catlos's *Kingdoms of Faith* as examples) what might seem like "fixed" historical categories and religious identities are still debated. The message must be that the choices we make about how to talk about history are not neutral and are necessarily connected to our own contexts—just as they were for historians who came before us—though that realization does not release us from our obligations to accuracy and objectivity. Having introduced these ideas and some materials with which students can draw conclusions about gaps between what they see in primary and secondary sources, I think it is always productive to ask students to reflect on how such experiences might influence their future approaches to historical questions and the sources they seek out to answer them. Finally, since the historian is never satisfied with his or her conclusions, it would also be useful for them and for us to reflect on the limits of this kind of critical reappraisal of our own positions when trying to understand historical figures and events in context. Though the risk of presentism, anachronism, and teleology are very real, students must still be encouraged to cultivate personal connections with materials that interest them.