

THE MEDIEVAL ACADEMY



OF AMERICA

# GRADUATE STUDENT COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

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University of Delaware
- Jacob Doss (2021), Social Media  
University of Texas–Austin
- Julia King (2021), Mentorship Program  
University of Bergen
- Jonathan Correa Reyes (2022)  
The Pennsylvania State University
- Logan Quigley (2022)  
University of Notre Dame
- Lauren Van Nest (2022)  
University of Virginia

## Chair's Message

Greetings Medievalist Graduate Students!

We at the GSC hope you are enjoying a pleasant and productive summer.

Along with the wider Medieval Studies community, the GSC has been adapting to the considerable changes of the past months in order to continue connecting and supporting medievalist graduate students. In conjunction with the virtual International Medieval Congress held in early July, we had enthusiastic participation in our virtual mentoring program and virtual social hour. We have also opened applications for a special one-time grant to support graduate student research projects that uniquely engage with the current research environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The deadline is 1<sup>st</sup> September and please consider applying!

Looking ahead to the beginning of fall semester, the GSC will continue providing resources and programs for medievalist graduate students as we enter into a vastly altered academic environment. Keep a lookout for our future newsletters, social media posts, mentoring programs, and conference events for guidance on all aspects of research, teaching, and graduate student life. We wish you a successful start to the academic year!

Sincerely,  
Christine Bachman  
Chair, Graduate Student Committee

### **Series on Teaching and Mentoring**

For the past few issues, the GSC Newsletter has featured a series on teaching the middle ages and mentoring students, drawn from the varied perspectives of medievalists at different points in their academic careers and in different fields. We hope these stories offer insights into how we can create more inclusive classrooms, thoughtfully foster student development, and effectively inspire interest in the fascinatingly complex and wonderfully surprising medieval world. For our final installment, Jake Coen presents his perspective on confronting white nationalism in the medieval studies classroom.

### **Medievalist Pedagogy Against White Nationalism: The Case of Saint Maurice**

By Jake Coen

The rising tide of violent white nationalisms in the United States and Europe during the first decades of the twenty-first century has brought new challenges into the medievalist classroom. Confronted with a seemingly ever-growing list of symbols, phrases, or works mangled to fit narratives of a white, Eurocentric medieval mystique, instructors in the field of Medieval Studies must increasingly consider the role of pedagogy as an avenue of activism. Yet, bridging the gap between medieval subjects and the twenty-four-hour news cycle is an endeavor fraught with challenges and can, unfortunately, be met with both student and administrative resistance. How, then, can we as early-career medievalist pedagogues use our platform to push back actively against white nationalist usurpations of those societies that we study and teach?

One pedagogical approach that I have used is to incorporate popular medievalisms as gateways that invite students to explore their own presuppositions as well as broader societal interpretations of the medieval past. In my medieval survey and medievalism classes, I introduce contemporary utilizations of Saint Maurice's eagle as one such means of exploring twenty-first century medievalisms, especially those founded in chauvinistic readings of medieval history. At the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally in 2017—a neo-Nazi demonstration that culminated in the murder of a peaceful counter-protester, Heather Heyer—white supremacists were depicted carrying shields that bore the "eagle of Saint George", a black eagle depicted with wings outstretched over a golden background. As a class, we examine images of these demonstrators and others using misinterpreted medieval images or phrases, including the "eagle of Saint George", to begin our discussion about how contemporary ideological movements can turn, consciously or unconsciously, to popular medievalisms as a means of expressing or propagating their agendas.

As many students may not be familiar with Saint George or the eagle, I then shift the conversation in order to provide necessary historical background. Saint George, famed as the leader of the so-called Theban Legion, was executed along with his soldiers in 287 at the Roman camp of Agaunum in the Swiss Alps following the legion's refusal to renounce Christianity on the orders of Emperor Maximian (r. 286-305). In the early middle ages, Maurice took his place among a growing list of venerated "military saints", including Saint George and Michael the Archangel, and his cult came to enjoy royal patronage under the Merovingians, Carolingians, and Ottonians. Over time, as the German emperors of the Holy Roman Empire continued to support the cult, Maurice became associated with an imperial symbol, namely the eagle. Depictions of Maurice carrying a shield or banner with the imperial eagle were common by the sixteenth century, as evidenced by a particularly famous portrait by Lucas Cranach the Elder (c. 1472-1553) in the early 1520s.

I then turn the discussion back over to students, asking them to think critically in think-pair-share or buzz group exercises to consider the value of such a figure to contemporary white nationalist ideologies. These brief activities quickly reveal students' insights into the question at hand, prompting conclusions about why white nationalists in the twenty-first-century United States would rally around a medieval military saint famed for resisting an abusive ruler in the name of their faith.

At this point, I once again shift the conversation by presenting the inherent irony underlying these chauvinistic ideas: Saint Maurice was African. Born in the city of Thebes, Maurice was of Egyptian origin and rose through the ranks of the Roman army before being called to the empire's Gallic provinces in order to suppress a rebellion. This realization often provokes laughter among the students at first, but it quickly becomes yet another way to think critically about the dangers of misinterpreted medievalisms in contemporary society. Ultimately, we are confronted with the fact that the appearance of Saint George's eagle shield at Charlottesville is not only dangerous because of those who bore it, but also grossly misinformed. In this way, students come to see the value in critical evaluations of contemporary medievalisms and become activists in their own right by deconstructing white supremacist symbolism.

This activity could be adapted to manifold other examples, ranging from the virally popular slogan “Deus Vult” in protests and online meme culture to older instances such the beheading of statues of the Biblical kings at Notre-Dame de Paris during the French Revolution. Addressing these topics is not without potential setbacks. There is always a possibility of certain students vocally espousing white nationalist beliefs in response to such an exercise, while others may be uncomfortable discussing such politically charged topics. These are valid concerns that can be addressed, at least in part, by issuing content warnings in advance. The risk, however, does not outweigh the potential reward of confronting students with the dangers of consciously misinterpreted or unconsciously misinformed medievalisms in contemporary sociopolitical movements. As medievalist pedagogues, then, it is incumbent upon us to resist violent white nationalisms abusing the medieval past where we have a platform—namely, the classroom.

*Jake Coen is a PhD candidate at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute. His research explores European political rhetorics between the eighth and twelfth centuries and focuses in particular on questions of resistance, legitimacy, and "propaganda" across a wide variety of genres and linguistic traditions.*

### **Series on Career Alternatives to the Tenure-Track**

For the following few issues, the GSC Newsletter will feature a series on career alternatives to tenure-track teaching. The series draws on the varied perspectives of medievalists who are pursuing a variety of careers outside the tenure-track. It offers insights into the nature of work in positions outside the tenure-track, what unique skills a background in medieval studies can bring to these careers, and what medievalist graduate students can do to prepare themselves to enter these fields. We are pleased to present the first installment.

#### **As a medievalist, you are good at solving problems**

By Chris Humphrey

How did I go from being a postdoctoral fellow in Medieval Studies to working as a project manager in a bank? The short answer is, not all in one go!

My first job after leaving academia was as an Education Consultant for an e-learning start-up. After being made redundant when that company went bust, I worked in a range of private sector roles, including technology, transportation, consulting and project management. Today, I manage a team of project managers for a leading sustainable bank – a long way from doing archival research, teaching seminars and publishing in niche journals like [Medieval English Theatre](#).

How did my training and background in Medieval Studies equip me for these roles in business? Well, not directly – there aren't any departments of Medieval Studies in a bank after all

(although it would be cool if there were). Rather than being hired for my subject matter knowledge or my PhD qualification per se, it's the advanced skill set that I built up during my academic career which has impressed five different private sector hiring managers over the years.

As the PostAc team explain in their 2019 report on [Matching PhD Graduates with Industry Jobs](#), employers outside of academia are keen to hire people who can produce 'complex deliverables' (p. 8). By complex deliverables they mean, products and services that solve one or more of the problems faced by today's companies, customers and citizens. Examples of such deliverables from my own career include:

- Managing a pan-European transport research project involving 15 partners
- Rolling out a technical training programme on behalf of a government department
- Producing marketing materials to support greener travel choices in European cities
- Moving a bank account application process from paper-based to web-based
- Producing a consulting report for a national retail consortium

The reality is that businesses, non-profits, and government departments sink or swim by their ability to produce complex deliverables in a timely and cost-effective fashion. And they need smart people with the right expertise to do this. How else does your bank build an app for you to conveniently manage your finances on your phone? Teams of people work together to design, prototype, and build every complex deliverable.

Remember, as a medievalist you are very good at producing complex deliverables. Think of a thesis chapter or paper or article you've written. You worked through a whole sequence of activities to create the finished article:

1. Establishing your research question
2. Developing your research methodology
3. Primary source research
4. Secondary source research
5. Summarising key arguments in the literature
6. Developing your own argument, findings and supporting evidence
7. Writing your paper or talk and revising multiple iterations
8. Creating a bibliography of sources
9. Editing your manuscript in line with publishing conventions
10. Submitting for review and revising in response to feedback

So, recognise that you already have the skills for producing complex deliverables in academia – a dissertation, an article, a taught course or a conference – that address challenging research questions.

This ability is highly transferable into other sectors in my experience. Now, I'm not saying that you can walk straight out of the archive or lecture hall and start building apps for Apple or

Google on day one. But many organisations, like [Amazon](#) or [McKinsey](#), are looking to directly hire doctoral graduates with precisely your skillset.

This should give you confidence when you go onto the job market outside of academia. The main challenge you'll face there is actually *communicating your value* to employers. This is where you need to work hard on your elevator pitch. At my interview with that e-learning start-up, I didn't talk directly about my academic research on medieval festivals! Instead, my pitch was:

'I'm a professional researcher and educator. I've won three separate grants against tough competition to fund my work over the last 8 years, enabling me to complete my ambition to write a book. As I've seen the Internet grow, I've become more interested in technology, and especially its potential to democratise learning and bring education and training to a much wider audience. That's why I now want to move into the private sector. This job will enable me to put my skills to work in developing high-quality e-learning courses for your clients.'

As my pitch shows, there's no mention of me being a PhD/post-doc who's leaving academia. My message to my future employer was 'I'm a professional who's changing employment sectors, with an advanced skill-set relevant to your industry'. So, work on articulating your own unique ability to solve the problems that employers have. For more help, use the resources I've provided on my website [Jobs on Toast](#), especially the articles on creating your professional brand, and telling a positive story at interviews. Good luck!

*Chris Humphrey holds a PhD in Medieval Studies from the University of York (UK), and works as a project manager and team leader for a values-based bank. He is the founder of the popular careers website Jobs on Toast, which provides resources for researchers looking for careers outside of academia*

## **Series on Work/Life Balance**

Across its next few issues, the GSC Newsletter will explore one of the most pressing and talked-about issues facing graduate students and young academic professionals today: walking the work-life balance high wire. Particularly in today's rapidly-changing world, our commitments to our professional lives and our relationships to our personal lives deserve more scrutiny and consideration than ever before. This series offers perspectives from current graduate students, recent graduates, and early-career faculty members reflecting on best practices, worst habits, and all-around good attempts at achieving that elusive balance.

### **Finding a Routine: The Trials and Errors of Developing a Work/Life Balance**

By Aidan Holtan

When I started my dissertation fellowship in June 2019, my first step was to write a huge to-do list of all I wanted to accomplish over the next year. Without having to worry about balancing

the competing time needs of teaching with those of research and my personal life, I was able to indulge in some pretty heady academic dreams. Oh, the articles I would write! The meticulously researched chapters I would produce for my impressed chair!

My second step was to crash and burn for about a week.

It quickly became clear that I needed to re-approach how I work in order to use this year effectively. With nothing but time before me, it was easy to 1) be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work that needed to be done, and 2) misjudge how much time and mental space is needed for each task. This not only impacted my research, but also my personal life. It's hard to enjoy the increased time for family and friends if I am worrying about my lack of productivity, or mentally crashed from spending too much time on my research.

Over the next few weeks, I discovered the following strategies to address these challenges:

- Every day that I worked, I had to make some progress with my writing. After some experimentation, I settled on a goal of at least two hours per workday. Focusing on time-worked rather than word count gave me some wiggle room for days that were more focused on revision than on generating new content. It also gave me some room for flexibility and forgiveness on the days when, for whatever reason, I just could not get words on the page. If I was on a roll at the end of two hours, then I would keep writing. If every minute of those two hours was a struggle, then I would be kind to myself at the end and move on to a different task or, sometimes, just call it a day. This proved to be a huge blessing when quarantine happened in the spring and, like many grad students, even thinking about writing felt like a monumental task.
- I developed a morning routine. After five years of teaching and coursework, I had become used to schedules that changed from semester to semester and fitting my research around those shifting schedules as best as I could. With the whole day before me, though, I quickly realized that I am *not* a morning person. Instead, I let myself have a more leisurely approach to the day: waking up around 9 am, drinking two cups of tea as I ate breakfast and surfed the internet, and, on really beautiful mornings, taking a walk around the neighborhood park for an hour or so.
- I also realized that my writing-brain doesn't really get going until late afternoon. Instead of pushing myself to write, I decided to start the workday with research or translation. By the end of the article/translation section, I was usually in the dissertation-groove enough to switch over to writing. On lucky days, I even had new ideas that I wanted to pursue.
- Finally, I took one to two days completely off per week. On these days, I would play board games with my husband, read for fun, and hang out with my friends. Stepping away was hard, and there were definitely weeks where I was less successful at this, but it was key for maintaining my productivity. On weeks that I didn't take a break, my brain

definitely took that break for me—I would ultimately be less productive, and there were more days where my writing would barely progress or I would find myself reading the same sentence over and over again without much comprehension. For me, taking days *off* meant that I would have better days *on*.

While the dissertation fellowship was an excellent opportunity to spend a year focusing on my research, it was also an ideal time to figure out how to balance my work and personal life. Where the last five years were spent carefully juggling my responsibilities as a teacher, student, and scholar, I finally had some breathing room to experiment with what actually worked best for me.

Of course, it wasn't a perfect year. There were days when I spent hours writing and erasing the same sentence, or even days when I crashed and nothing was completed. And, of course, I haven't unlocked the secret to the perfect work/life balance (even just for myself). Now that the fellowship year is over, I'm back to teaching. I love my students and going back to the classroom has been a great comfort in the midst of everything changing. At the same time, though, it's easy to lose track of the routine that I've developed over the last year when the only person depending on me each day was, well, me. It will take more experimentation and more practice to continue to carve out time for myself as I move into the next step. Even so, my experience of the past year has shown me that the time and effort I put into developing an effective work/life balance leads to happy results—both in my scholarship, but also for my overall wellbeing.

*Aidan Holtan is a lecturer at Purdue University, where she graduated with her PhD in August 2020. Aidan's research focuses on the body and monstrosity in Old English and Old Norse literature.*

### **New Funding Opportunity**

Are you looking for funding for your research? Consider this new funding opportunity for graduate students from the Medieval Academy!

### **MAA-GSC New Horizons Graduate Student Research Grant**

Applications due 1 September

The Medieval Academy of America Graduate Student Committee is calling for applications for grants of up to \$500 to support graduate student research projects that uniquely engage with the current research environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as medievalist graduate students have lost access to much of our primary research material because of restrictions on travel and access to collections, we have also been inspired to develop inventive solutions to continue conducting dynamic and innovative research. Proposed projects might creatively use the digital resources available when physical resources are not, or might consider how the middle ages illuminates our understanding of the current social, cultural, and economic environment. Applications will be evaluated on the originality of how the proposed



project engages with the current environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its potential to contribute to medieval studies. This is a special one-time grant program. Up to four will be awarded for outstanding applications selected by the MAA Graduate Student Committee.

See the Medieval Academy website for more information and details on applying:

<https://www.medievalacademy.org/page/NewHorizonsGrant>

### **An Invitation from the Editors**

In response to the diverse needs and interests of graduate students in Medieval Studies, the GSC plans to continue expanding the variety of content offered in the newsletter. We hope to feature more narratives spotlighting the diverse experiences in which graduate students participate in their higher-ed journeys (conferences, events, workshops, travels, organizations, etc...) and when beginning their forays into the job market, whether on traditional routes, in alternative academic positions, or compatible careers.

If you have an interest in sharing your experiences and ideas as a graduate student or early career scholar, please send queries and contributions to GSC Newsletter editors Christine Bachman ([cbachman@udel.edu](mailto:cbachman@udel.edu)) and Logan Quigley ([lquigle1@nd.edu](mailto:lquigle1@nd.edu)).

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