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  University of Delaware
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  University of Texas–Austin
- Julia King (2021), Mentorship Program
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  University of Notre Dame
- Lauren Van Nest (2022)
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Chair’s Message

Greetings Medievalist Graduate Students!
We at the GSC hope you are having a bright beginning to the new year and the new semester.

As our research and teaching environments continue to evolve, we are also considering our futures as medievalist graduate students. The three narratives included in this issue of the newsletter address different aspects of exploring career tracks that use our unique skills and navigating the challenges of applying for competitive positions. We hope the pieces offer some guidance and inspiration as you look ahead.

This spring we also look ahead to the chance to connect with our medievalist friends and colleagues at the MAA Annual Meeting and the International Congress on Medieval Studies. At the Annual Meeting, the GSC is hosting a roundtable, a graduate student social, our mentorship program, and a mentoring morning coffee. At the ICMS the GSC is hosting a panel, a graduate student social, and our mentorship program. You will find more details on these events in this issue of the newsletter. We hope you are able to join us.

Wishing you a happy and healthy spring!

Sincerely,
Christine Bachman
Chair, Graduate Student Committee

Special Feature

As we look ahead to the spring weather and the end to another academic year, the GSC Newsletter is pleased to include a piece interested in strategies for approaching the job market. In his special feature, Joseph Williams reflects on the importance of focusing your job search to good-fit opportunities.

Applying to Opportunities: The ‘Fit Strategy’ vs. the ‘Crapshoot’
By Joseph Williams

Medievalists at the junior scholar stage of their careers--including graduate students and recent PhDs--face the grim reality that only a handful of relevant teaching positions, fellowships, and research postdocs are available in a given application cycle. In the face of so few positions, each with large applicant pools, even the most qualified scholars often regard the application process as a 'crapshoot.' I certainly felt this way, and given the circumstances, a certain strategy seemed appealing: the best way to win a career crapshoot is to participate in as many die rolls as possible. To simplify, the 'crapshoot' application strategy looks like this: 1. identify a large number of opportunities that are linked, however precariously, to your qualifications; 2. create a standard and reproducible application; 3. 'tweak for fit'; 4. submit and cross your fingers.
Let us discard this ineffective approach. Based on my experience both applying to positions as a junior scholar and reviewing applications, I suggest applying thoughtfully and passionately to the small number of opportunities that are a natural fit.

I gained perspective on this problem when I was part of a search committee. Contrary to a mental image I had long entertained, the committee was not seated in gilded cathedrae, cheerfully awaiting a bounty of star applications to be carted in. Instead, we dreaded the possibility of a failed search. We toiled over the advertisement, crafting it to convey our most critical priorities without discouraging a single qualified applicant. There was no guarantee that we would find the right person.

We had a huge applicant pool, but I soon learned that such totals are misleading. Opportunities that receive hundreds of applications do not receive hundreds of competitive applications. Significantly less than half of our pool of aspiring professors met the minimum requirements and made it through the first cut. The pool was attenuated further, as most of the remaining applications were unclearly written, sloppily assembled, or missing key components. I recognized the ‘crapshoot’ strategy in action: it was obvious that most applicants were courting as many opportunities as possible, whether or not they were fully qualified, and sacrificing quality for quantity in their submissions. The strategy was misguided. Calling the application process a 'crapshoot' implies that good and bad applications all have an equally low probability of success. But in this case, the probability of getting the job with a sloppy or unqualified application was not one-in-a-hundred: it was zero. Meanwhile, the fully qualified and well-written applications that made a genuine and compelling case for fit could be counted on one hand, and they coasted onto the short list.

I have had two different types of experiences when applying to competitive positions. In the first type, I know that my interests and expertise do not quite match the opportunity. I tell myself that it is important to apply to 'everything,' low that I am on the totem pole. But the application is difficult and time-consuming to write. It feels forced and fake, almost cynical. My argument for fit is tenuous. If I am lucky enough to be called in for an interview, this experience only magnifies my insecurities. I find myself claiming to be capable of whatever the institution needs, leaving the interviewer with no real sense of what my true interests and purpose are. The application is doomed from the start, and after I receive the "We had an unusually high number of applicants" letter, I realize my effort was out of proportion with my probability of success.

In the second type of experience, the position excites me. I know I would excel and be happy in it. The application writes itself, with no need for boilerplate prose. My CV takes care of the qualifications, and writing the cover letter is an optimistic task of imagining what I could accomplish while partnering with this institution. I am more likely to get an interview, and when the day comes, all the questions are in my wheelhouse and I have genuine questions for the interviewer. Not only are these the opportunities I covet most, I have also had more success with them than the bad-fit opportunities.
How does one determine whether an opportunity is a good fit? My simple advice is to read the job advertisement as carefully as the committee crafted it. This will tell you whether you are qualified and what the institution's priorities are. If the advertisement jives with your qualifications and priorities, and you write an application of which you are proud, you will gain an edge over scores of applicants. Obviously, there are no promises, even if the fit is great and the application well-crafted. As in other facets of life, really putting yourself out there can make rejection more painful. But that is no reason to stop applying to high-fit positions. If you remember that your ideal institution and you are trying to find each other, your experience on the market need not resemble a 'crapshoot.'

Joseph Williams is Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Maryland, where he began teaching in 2018. He is an architectural historian focusing on design and construction practice in medieval Southern Italy and the Mediterranean. His teaching and research focus on themes such as digital approaches to archaeology and architecture, cross-cultural exchange and conflict in the Mediterranean, and the premodern integration of design, construction, and structure. He received his Ph.D. in Art History from Duke University.

Series on Career Alternatives to the Tenure-Track

For the past few issues, the GSC Newsletter has featured 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. In the first of this issue’s two alt-ac installments, Danièle Cybulskie writes about sharing her medieval expertise outside traditional academic environments. Then, Konrad Hughes reflects on his own experiences marrying his medieval research with creative interests.

For Indies, This Above All: To Thine Own Self be True

By Danièle Cybulskie

My degrees hang on my wall above a shelf with the tools of my trade on it (headphones, replica artifacts, a metric ton of Post-It Notes) and a Lego Wonder Woman clock. The knowledge behind them has been a part of my life every day since I got them, but the degrees themselves haven’t been the tickets to success they’re so often cracked up to be. On The Medieval Podcast, I’ve spoken with dozens of amazing scholars, and many (if not most) of the most dynamic and inspiring guests are not full faculty members, if they have post-secondary work at all. When you’ve trained to master academia – when you’ve loved it deeply despite the pain – what happens when there is no longer a place in it for you?

I think the biggest hurdle for graduates faced with this question is fundamentally a problem of identity. It’s a very scary thing to look hard in the mirror and strip away the idea that academia
is who you are, and if you can’t be a part of it, you’ve failed. The pain and fear of letting go of that idea is real. Steeped in a culture of overwork and incredibly high expectations, we have often forgotten almost everything else about who we are out of simple disuse. So, it’s an effort to remember: what do I love? What am I good at in addition to academic performance? Who am I without my degree?

I used to want to be a professor because I love teaching, but after years on the hamster wheel of short-term contracts and layoffs, I took that long look in the mirror and let go of that narrow path. Once I did, the world became full of opportunities to teach. I wrote. I made a podcast. I made a masterclass. On and off, I still teach a college class I created as an independent expert, and my classroom teaching has touched a few thousand people. My teaching outside of the classroom, however, has touched over 1.5 million.

Graduate school sharpens our expertise and our tenacity, both of which independent scholars need when we strike out beyond the ivory tower. But graduate school bestows those gifts on everyone, so it’s our unique, quirky interests and talents that allow us to stand out and stand on our own. I think Medieval Studies lends itself to this especially well, because interest in the medieval world – found in everyone from casual Game of Thrones viewers to hardcore LARPers – necessarily allows for some acceptance of quirkiness and geekiness. After all, to talk about GoT with your peers means you’ve already taken the step of admitting you think dragons are cool. Suddenly, what was formerly dismissed as almost painfully uncool is now mainstream, and this change has led to more widespread acceptance of niche interests explored by people with a serious passion for them.

My work as an indie started out because I really wished there were short and enjoyable articles on random interesting nuggets of information about the medieval world. I couldn’t find any, so I wrote them myself. With practice, I became very comfortable with my own voice, and now the people who follow me and support me both emotionally and financially do so because I let them see the person within. I share my joy, enthusiasm, and sheer geeky pleasure in ways that come most naturally. For me, that means writing and public speaking. For you, it could be anything from cross-stitch to video game commentary.

In the middle of the Venn diagram of what you love, what you’re good at, and what the people want is your contribution to the world. If you can give people what they want or need, you can get paid. If you do something you’re good at, you won’t easily burn out. If you do something you love, it will keep you going in tough times, and your passion will draw the people who will help keep you going, too.

If there is no place in academia for you, that doesn’t mean you’ve failed. Have faith in your own value because of your quirks, not your degrees, because it’s your quirks that will open doors. It’s not just about self-esteem for its own sake: it’s about believing in yourself enough to experiment and build things, having the courage to put yourself out there, and believing you’re worth being paid for your work.
Take the time – and it may take a long time (a bath, a hike, a weekend, a month) – to get quiet with yourself and the amazing, unique person you are. Education is only one part of your awesomeness. Consider what you want to see more of in the world and ask yourself if you can make or do that thing yourself. Whichever path you take, you’re not a failure. The people who know themselves are not only ahead of the game: they’re the people who will make the new rules.

_Danièle Cybulskie is the host of_ The Medieval Podcast and the author of _Life in Medieval Europe: Fact and Fiction_. She currently teaches part-time at Conestoga College and also runs her own online course, _The Medieval Masterclass for Creators_.

**Unintentional Blessings**
By Konrad Hughes

Not every medievalist finds their home right away. I certainly did not when I attended the University of Memphis as an undergraduate or the University of Missouri as a master’s student. Neither university has a dedicated medieval department or specialists in my field of research. When I applied to graduate programs, I really did not know what I was doing. I had been in the business world selling antiques for eight years and had no idea how to approach continuing my education in early medieval studies. However, the Classical Arts and Humanities master’s program at the University of Missouri has allowed me to pursue both my creative and academic goals.

Now in my last semester of the program, I would like to share my experience working within a non-medieval focused department as a medievalist who writes historical fiction, theater, and poetry. I use my name Konrad Bennett Hughes in academia, but for fiction writing I use the pseudonym Kaptain Viciorious time-travelling space pirate. I am a historian and writer from dimensions unsounded, times forgotten and unremembered. I explore the past through both academic and creative endeavors ranging from electronic music to historical fiction, from conference presentations to scholarly publications. If you are looking for time-travelling adventure, _look no further_.

I ended up in this strange state of affairs through a series of events and choices which have unexpectedly worked out better than I could have imagined. It just took thinking outside the box with my education, seeking out advisors who would support my ideas, and pursuing unique opportunities.

The Ancient Mediterranean Department at the University of Missouri, which focuses on Greek and Roman archaeology and languages, created a new program in Classical Arts and Humanities in 2019. Unlike a typical academic degree, this program has allowed me to pursue both my academic and creative goals in my classwork and through my thesis project. But it was not always easy. I was in the first cohort of this new program and blazing a trail through graduate school is never a simple task.
It took my advisors supporting my out-of-the-box ideas, which blend academia and creativity, before I realized I was in the right place. As some of my department’s specialties are the reception of Greek mythology and Indo-European oral traditions, I brought the Classical into the medieval, connecting the dots between time and space.

My thesis project has consisted of researching and writing a historical fiction novel, which explores the ninth-century reception of Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, through a variety of lenses. The pieces fell together with each new class I took in my graduate program: from a far-travelling Scandinavian völva accompanying Rus merchants on the Volga River, to a Khazar shaman plagued by her brother’s illness, to a Bulgar monk searching out the missing fragments of Neoptolemus’ story. From Oral Traditions to Medieval Art History-Remixed to Anthropology of Shamanism, the theoretical framework of each class built upon the last. Each professor who guided me through a new avenue of investigation left their mark upon my journey. I never could have done it all alone.

Coming into graduate school, I had only self-published my works as zines, but the connections I made between both professors and other students led to opportunities for my creative work. One of my fellow program members was willing to publish one of my mythological short stories in her online publication, Carmina Magazine.

My luck in creative endeavors through the University of Missouri was just beginning, though. They have not only a robust creative writing program but also a very healthy theatre department. In December 2020 they digitally performed a short play I wrote, Acquiring Funds, as a part of the Life and Literature Performance Series. This piece explores the relationships between lovers as they grow older and is based on my personal experiences as well as love stories told to me by the eight couples whose weddings I have performed. I find that I work best when I can find the balance between research, personal experience, and creation, as the lines between them constantly blur.

I think the key to finding your place in any community is looking for ways to interact with others and with ideas that are unconventional. All graduate students write papers and analyze data, but the opportunity to learn about past cultures through whatever means necessary is what defines being a medievalist to me. We do not have to bury our heads in the sand or in books alone, as there are a host of opportunities to explore the medieval world that might not always come to us at first glance.

As I leave the safety of a unique graduate program, I am preparing for jobs in video game content writing and museum work, while keeping my options open with a host of other creative projects. Foremost of those is a tabletop RPG setting based on my research into Rus, Khazar, and Muslim interaction in the ninth and tenth centuries, which I hope to find a home for within one of the currently popular systems.

This is all to say, you can become a medievalist without attending a medieval program, but you just might not turn out to be a traditionalist. I certainly haven’t. But the key takeaway I find
from these experiences is that putting yourself out there with an open mind, even when your confidence is waning, is the key to succeeding in any endeavor.

*Konrad Bennett Hughes is a master’s student in the Classical Arts and Humanities track of the Ancient Mediterranean Department of the University of Missouri. His research is focused upon cross-cultural trade networks in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages between northeastern Europe and central Asia.*

**Announcements**

The MAA Graduate Student Committee is hosting a variety of events at the 2021 MAA Annual Meeting. Please join us for any or all. We hope to see you there!

**Thursday, 15 April @ 22:00 GMT / 18:00 ET / 15:00 PT**
**Transcription Workshop & Transcribathon**
Join the IU Medieval Studies Institute Graduate Student Advisory Committee and the MAA Graduate Student Committee for an evening Transcription Workshop and weekend-long Transcribathon. Liz Hebbard will lead a manuscript transcription workshop Thursday evening to start off IU’s annual Transcribathon, which will run from Thursday-Saturday (April 15-17). No prior experience with manuscripts is necessary.

**Thursday, 15 April 2021 @ 00:00 GMT / 20:00 ET / 17:00 PT**
**Graduate Student Social Hour**
Join the MAA Graduate Student Committee and the IU Medieval Studies Institute Graduate Student Advisory Committee for the graduate student virtual social hour at the MAA Annual meeting. Drop in for an hour of connecting and conversation with fellow medievalist graduate students.

**Friday, 16 April 2021 @ 14:00 GMT / 10:00 ET / 07:00 PT**
**Mentoring & Morning Coffee**
Join the MAA Inclusivity & Diversity and Graduate Student Committees for mentoring and morning coffee at the MAA Annual Meeting. This mentoring event is designed to bring together medievalists at different points in their academic careers, from graduate students to senior scholars, and from across different field, for an hour of conversation and mentorship.

**Friday, 16 April 2021 @ 15:00 GMT / 11:00 ET / 08:00 PT**
**Graduate Medievalists and the Institutions We Work In: Community and Activism (Roundtable)**
Session Sponsored by the MAA Graduate Student Committee and the IU Medieval Studies Institute Graduate Student Advisory Committee
Chair: Lauren Van Nest (University of Virginia)
Roundtable participants: Abby Ang (Indiana University Bloomington), Christine Bachman (University of Delaware), Henry Gruber (Harvard University), Marian Homans-Turnbull (UC Berkeley), Nahir I. Otaño-Gracia (University of New Mexico), Alexa Sand (Utah State University)

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

**MAA CARA Summer Programs & Tuition Scholarships**
A limited number of stipends are available for graduate students and particularly promising undergraduate students participating in summer courses in medieval languages or manuscript studies. The stipend will be paid directly to the student and must be used to offset a portion of the tuition cost. The awards are contingent on acceptance into the program. Applicants must be members of the Medieval Academy in good standing with at least one year of graduate school remaining and must demonstrate both the importance of the summer course to their program of study and their home institution’s inability to offer analogous coursework. To apply, click here.

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) and Logan Quigley (lquigle1@nd.edu).

Follow the GSC on Social Media!

Get the latest news and information from the GSC on Facebook (facebook.com/GSCMAA) and Twitter (@GSC_MAA).