

## History 2345: On the Road Again

### Syllabus Exegesis and Rationale

---

#### The Basics

This syllabus is designed for a mid-level history class, aimed at students with some basic, pre-existing knowledge of history as a discipline and of the medieval period. The class is meant to be a study of the specifics of medieval travel, and has several primary goals. Firstly, and most obviously, I want students to come away from the semester with a better understanding of the reasons why medieval people left their homes and voyaged out into the world. Secondly, I want students to gain an appreciation for the degree to which medieval societies were built on, and around, motion and movement. Thirdly, I would hope to leverage our in-class discussions into a broader examination of those aspects of society – political, religious, economic, etc. – that are interested by the issue of travel. Our subject cuts across lines of class, ethnicity, religion and geography, and in studying forms of medieval movement students will, by necessity, broaden their understanding of the medieval past along multiple vectors.

The syllabus is keyed to the Fall 2020 semester, and follows a projection of Cornell's academic calendar in setting breaks and the end of the term. I am estimating a class of 10-12 students, and have set aside presentation time based on those numbers. A much larger or smaller class would necessitate some reworking of the syllabus, or the requirements for presentations, or both. There is some room for flexibility, however. I have included one field trip day for the class to get an introduction to the Rare Books and Manuscripts collection, and November 24<sup>th</sup> is a day without assigned reading. I have left the 24<sup>th</sup> unscheduled with the idea of using it for a workshop during which students can toil on their final projects in community with each other.

The amount of reading and extra-classroom work is appropriate for students at institution like Cornell. I would reassess the readings if I were teaching this class at a college or university with less-prepared or committed students, where asking this level of work might be counterproductive. In those cases, I would adjust the readings to fit the needs and abilities of the student body at large, while still attempting to keep the course's thematic components alive. I would also, in that case, include a significant "Further Readings" section, both to demonstrate the of historiographical breadth available in the field, and to provide more motivated students with a roadmap for extra investigation.

### **Graded Assignments**

A student's final grade is comprised of three primary components: participation, article reviews, and a final project. All told there are 100 points available to students, and no possibility for extra credit.

Class participation accounts for 26% of the grade. Of that, 11% comes from Blackboard discussion posts that students must complete before every class. There are 22 opportunities over the semester for postings, and so every substantive and thoughtful post yields  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a point for the students. This means that while the responses are individually low-stakes, taken together they form a substantial part of the grade. I did not want to heavily penalize students for missing the occasional post, but I wanted to give the process enough weight to matter. My intent with these posts is two-fold: 1) to use them to give students an opportunity to work through some ideas before we get to class; and 2) to give me a heads-up about any issues that came up in the readings, so that I might have a chance to prepare prior to class. Additionally, the Blackboard discussion posts keep a record of class thought over the semester, and can be a useful reference point for students as the term progresses.

General class participation is graded in a similar fashion. The class meets 27 times in the semester. Each class that a student attends and participates in is worth  $\frac{1}{2}$  a point towards their final grade. There are three exceptions: November 3, December 1 and December 3. These are the days dedicated to student presentations of their final projects, and it is important that the whole class is present engaged on those days. Each of those days is worth 1 point. Again, any individual poor showing in class will prove harmless, but if a student consistently fails to participate in class discussions then their reticence will show in their final grade.

Written assignments comprise 36% of the whole grade. Students are required to write three short essays with increasing grade weight. The first two essays, worth 6% and 12% respectively, are identical to each other. These assignments ask students to find an academic journal article (not one on the class syllabus) and write a brief review of it. This assignment serves several purposes. It provides an introduction to using academic journals as resources, and it allows students to investigate issues from readings or class discussion that interest them. The assignment also has the potential to lay groundwork for the final project; the first review essay is due a week prior to the final project proposal, meaning that students can use the process of writing the essay to begin inquiry or work related to their end-of-term project. The final review essay is  $\frac{1}{3}$  longer, worth 18% of the grade, and asks students to examine two separate articles addressing the same basic topic. My rationale here is that students will benefit from having to unpack the different ways that different scholars approach and analyze the same question. From a purely self-centered perspective, I would add that these writing assignments have the added benefit of possibly expanding my own catalogue of knowledge.

The final project of the semester, worth a total of 38% of the grade, is a much less structured beast. In thinking about this assignment I decided that I wanted to give the students wide latitude to come up with projects for investigating and learning about the issues at stake for the class. While I

have not taken the traditional option of a research paper off of the table, I would encourage my students to think creatively about how to tackle this assignment. I am open to a range of approaches. Off the top of my head I can imagine several possibilities: a Gephi network analysis of points ports and people from the texts that we read; a mapping project tracing lines of itineraries and trade; a portfolio project; physical reproductions of ships or other means of conveyance, etc. While I suspect that some students will take the option of writing an essay, I am hopeful that at least a few of them will bring some truly creative ideas to the table. I can see multiple benefits to structuring the assignment in this way. It hopefully encourages engagement with the material in a vein that the student finds useful and fulfilling. This will, in turn, facilitate better learning and more attention to detail on the student's part. This approach also demonstrates to students the great flexibility and potential offered by humanities programs like history. I firmly believe that the further we get into the digital age the more danger there is in keeping our assigned work wholly within traditional lanes. The furtherance of knowledge does not always need to be tightly girdled to be rigorous.

That said, I also believe in the importance of teaching students how to write with clarity and balance. Towards that end, writing will be a component of each final project. The length and structure of the project's written portion is something that I will establish with each student when during our meeting before the project proposal due date. Regardless of the format, however, each project will come accompanied by a written section which should, in some way, explain the student's rationale, processes, and conclusions and situate the project within the historiography.

The grading for the final project is also somewhat flexible. As the syllabus notes, students will suggest a grading rubric in their proposal. This will, again, reflect the outcome of my conversation with the student. The rubric will also be subject to my approval. My thinking here is twofold: 1) that the range of potential projects makes constructing a general rubric a useless

endeavor, especially given the possibility that some projects may not wrap up neatly. In an ideal world at least some students would begin projects that are interesting and rewarding enough that they outlive the class. 2) that giving students a voice in how their work is assessed will increase their engagement with the project and limit any potential opaqueness about grading.

### **General Structure:**

Broadly speaking, I have broken the syllabus into two main sections. The first deals with the question of why medieval people traveled. This part of the class considers several broad categories of reasons for travel. The second half of the class examines issues of how people moved. This section looks at some of the specifics of travel, considering things like ship design, road maintenance, and wayfinding. Generally, each week is taken up by a specific subsection (“Trade and Trades” for example, or “Ships and Sailing”). The readings in each subsection are a mix of primary and secondary sources. In most weeks the Tuesday class is given over to secondary sources, and the Thursday class to primary materials. My thought process in this was that reading the secondary literature should help provide some groundwork for the following investigation of the primary materials. This pattern does not hold throughout; some subsections are shorter and some longer, and some are less structured. This description, however, served as the broad template under which I put the syllabus together.

There are several main texts that we will use throughout the class. Jean Verdon’s *Travel in the Middle Ages* serves throughout the first half of the class something of a standard textbook. Verdon’s book is thoughtful, informative and well-written. To some degree the subsections in the first half of the semester mimic the chapter structure of his book. Verdon’s primary concern in looking at medieval travel lies in working out who was traveling and why, and as such his work offers a useful framework to follow. The second half of the class will build more on Norbert Ohler’s *The Medieval*

*Traveller*. While there is some overlap between Ohler and Verdon's books, Ohler's work is far more centered on questions of how; he spends significant time considering things like rates of movement and tidal patterns. *The Medieval Traveller*, then, works well as a framing piece for the term's second half. Throughout the semester we will use excerpts from two books from the University of Toronto's Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures series, the Allen and Amt edited *The Crusades: A Reader* and the Bret Whalen edited *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: A Reader*. Students are not required to buy either text; the passages will be available on Blackboard. The other book which is spread over various parts of the course is the 15<sup>th</sup> century William Wey's *Itineraries*. Various parts of that text speak well to different sections of the syllabus.

It is worth noting – both here and in the class – that the distinctions drawn by the syllabus are inherently artificial. Religious war and secular war blended together, people traveled for a variety of simultaneous purposes and the use of one form of transport did not discount the use of another; movement, as it turns out, is a difficult thing to nail down. Paying attention to the slippages in definitions, however, is part of the work of the class. The other point to make explicit is the wide temporal range at play here. This is a syllabus that take the Middle Ages as if it were a set and definable period with an internal consistency. It will be important to bring the class's attention to the difference caused by the passage of time, and to pay heed to the utter fragility of any given historical moment.

## **Weekly Structure and Reading Rationale**

### **Section I: Why**

#### **Week 1: Introductions**

The first week is comprised of a single class, and much of that period will be taken up with introductions and housekeeping matters. However, I will ask the students to come to class having

read Verdon's twelve-page introduction. I would use the last part of the class to begin a discussion to find out where the students are in their conception of the medieval period, and about what travel in the medieval period might have looked like. Ideally this discussion will help set a stage for the rest of the semester.

### **Weeks 2 and 3: Diplomacy and Church Business**

This section takes as its guide Verdon's chapter on traveling for one's lord. Verdon covers a lot of ground, considering heralds, papal emissaries, late medieval diplomats and others. The other reading for the first part of the week is from C.H. Lawrence's *The Friars*. The chosen chapters address the founding of the Franciscans and Dominicans orders. Verdon's chapter does not include the mendicants (they feature in a later chapter for him) and Lawrence's work serves to fill in that gap. The rest of this subsection is comprised of two fairly substantial primary texts. The first is Jocelin de Brakelonde's *The Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*. Jocelin's text serves several functions here. It is an easy read, making it a gentle introduction to primary materials for students. It is informative of a wide range of social and economic issues at play in the period, and the notes in the translation do an excellent job of explaining the text. Lastly, Jocelin's *Chronicle* relates an astounding amount of travel to and from the abbey (for an outline of the travel in the text, see my A-exam for Andy). The second primary text is Gerald of Wales's *The Journey Through Wales*. Gerald is a more difficult read in some respects, but also offers an in-turns amusing and serious recounting of his recruiting trip around Wales. This text opens the door to a number of questions about travel – Gerald's and others'. It is also full of elements which will come back later on the syllabus, for example in the weeks dedicated to the crusades, to roads or to wayfinding. Students have a full week to read Gerald, since the Tuesday class that week is given over to a visit to the library. This should help mitigate the increased difficulty of the text.

Overall, I want to students to come away from these two weeks with a better understanding of the possibilities for travel in the period, and to begin to get a sense for the scale involved.

#### **Week 4: Trade and Trades**

The focus of this week is on travel for economic reasons. Attention here will be split between commercial travel and the travel of tradesmen. Verdon's chapter here primarily deals with mercantile travel, with a focus on the movement of cargo. The chapter from Peter Spufford's book are more focused on the traders themselves; he discusses both merchants and merchant houses. Spufford's work is especially useful in demonstrating the networks of commerce and exchange that existed. If Jocelin de Brakelonde showed how England and the edges of the world connected to Rome and the Mediterranean heart through ecclesiastical connections, Spufford's text makes clear that parallel commercial ties also existed. The third reading for the first part of the week is from Julius Klein's *The Mesta*, and gives a brief history of the annual transhumant sheep drives in Spain. This yearly movement of vast herds of sheep and shepherds through Iberia – initially along the Christian/Muslim border and then later through dedicated sheep walks – opens up questions of borders, property and medieval conceptions of geographic scale.

The readings for the second half of the week involve several sets of primary sources. The series from Lopez and Irving are brief merchant reports, and the reading from Allen and Amt is an excerpt from the laws of the kingdom of Jerusalem. Notable in this last reading are the number and variety of trade good passing through the kingdom's borders and the mechanisms by which the kingdom attempted to control and tax those goods. The final reading for the week is a bit off of the beaten path. I am asking students to read the first chapter of Ken Follett's *Pillars of the Earth*, a historical fiction based in 12<sup>th</sup> century England. I set the reading because the chapter follows a stonemason's itinerate efforts to find work over the course of a year. Despite the fictional nature of

the reading, I feel that it offers a highly readable and realistic depiction of labor mobility in the medieval period.

### **Week 5-7: Pilgrimages**

The next three weeks are devoted to investigating pilgrimage. Week five begins with Verdon's chapter on traveling for the Lord (this is the chapter where Verdon also discusses the mendicant orders), and the first chapter of Diana Webb's history of European pilgrimage. Taken together, the two readings offer well-rounded introduction to the topic. The primary readings for the week come from Allen and Amt and touch on the major regional pilgrimage sites of St.-Denis and the shrine of Thomas Beckett. There is also a link to a PBS documentary on the modern pilgrimage site of Lourdes, in France. The purpose of this week is to provide a basic grounding in the idea of religious pilgrimage – something that, in my experience, college students find strange and foreign – and to begin our investigation by considering local travel. Part of Webb's chapter is a discussion of local shrines. I considered using early selections from her book on English pilgrimages in which she lays out a startling web of local shrines and martyrs. That book can be overwhelming in its details, however, and I feel that the material is better delivered through a combination of the materials that I have selected and class discussion. The video is meant to show the role of pilgrimage in the modern world. I believe strongly that students deal best with the medieval when they can see connections to their own world.

Week six expands the idea of pilgrimage outward and focuses on the two major European sites: Rome and Santiago de Compostela. The primary reading for this week is from Debra Birch's *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages*. The readings from Birch include the first chapter which lays out the early history of Rome as a pilgrimage site, and two chapters dedicated to investigating the ways that pilgrims spent their time in the city. The other secondary source is Marta González Vázquez's

article on women on pilgrimage take Compostela as its primary site. Vázquez's piece is useful in that it brings the question of gender into the discussion. To this point in the semester there has been little talk of gender at all, but travel can serve as a good lens for thinking about the role of women in medieval societies. The two primary readings from the week are both pilgrim guides. The first, from Whalen, is an excerpt from *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela* and provides an itinerary for travel to the site. The second, sections from the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, acted as a highly popular tourist guide for visitors to the city. Birch writes briefly about the *Mirabilia* in the chapters we read, and the reading serves as a nice follow up.

Week seven takes us to the most central of all pilgrimage sites: Jerusalem. Nicole Chareyron's book provides a nicely done synthesis of primary documentation into an account of the journey. The chapters selected deal, like Birch's the week before, with the possibilities available to pilgrims in and around Jerusalem. The readings for the first part of the week also include Leigh Ann Craig's article on women pilgrims to Rome and Jerusalem and Elke Weber's essay on the Jewish pilgrims and travelers in the medieval Holy Land. Craig's article is standing in somewhat for her book *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons*. Weber's article is meant to introduce the students to the idea that the Holy Land was not simply contested space, but was also negotiated space. The three major religions all laid claim to the city in various ways, and they had to deal with each other. The primary readings for the week also underscore this issue. The sections from Benjamin of Tudela in Whalen follow up on Weber's point about Jewish travelers and holy sites. The chapters from William Wey make clear the negotiations between not only Christian and Muslims in Jerusalem, but also between competing sects of Christians within the Holy Sepulcher itself.

## **Weeks 8-9: Conflict**

The class will spend these two weeks learning about the ways that conflict and war caused movement in the medieval world. The first week includes Fall Break, but then picks up with the Crusades – a natural extension from the previous week’s work. I am, frankly, somewhat unsure of my footing here. The Crusades is such a large and complicated topic that I struggled to find a way to properly deal with it. I have settled on providing very little secondary background in the readings, and relying on students coming to the table with some basic knowledge. The *Gesta Francorum* provides a good account of the First Crusade that should fill in the basic gaps and give us a European perspective. I considered, also, including the four accounts of Urban’s call to arms at Clermont (Allen and Amt provide all four), but decided that the *Gesta Francorum* gives more information about travel and movement. I have included Allen and Amt’s excerpt from Usamah Ibn Mundquidh which provides an Islamic perspective on the Franks in the Holy Land. Ibn Mundquidh’s text also ties nicely into the previous week’s themes of travel in the Holy Land as an act of spatial and religious negotiation. Lastly, Bernard Hamilton’s essay broaches the topic of the role of the Crusade’s in expanding and informing the European global imaginary. I am generally staying away from questions of global geography in this course. However, in considering European ideas about travel and movement it is useful to establish an understanding of how the English or the Franks understood their geographic space in the world.

The next week moves from religious conflict to study how secular war acted as a rationale for travel and movement. The first part of the week is given to a reading of Gerald of Wales’s *Conquest of Ireland*. I chose Gerald over another writer like Froissart because of the sheer amount of travel that Gerald recounts. The text also documents one of the earlier European colonial efforts, and so provides room for discussion about the ways that medieval Europe’s societies of motion helped to lay the groundwork for the later expansions and colorizations that marked the early

modern period. The second part of the week offers something of a departure from reading: students are asked to learn about and examine the Bayeux Tapestry. The tapestry offers a surprising range of information about medieval travel, and it certainly tells a compelling story. Students will be directed to read through the Reading Museum's website on the artifact, to spend time looking at the whole tapestry, and to watch a brief video animating the later parts of the tapestry. The work for this day is somewhat light, in part because I anticipate that discussion of Gerald's *Conquest of Ireland* may spill over from into Thursday.

## **Section II: How**

### **Week 10: On the Road**

Week nine begins a new section and a new general focus. Where before the class has paid attention to who was traveling and why, from here on out we will give thought to better learning the particulars of travel. The primary reading for the week is from Ohler and comprises more than half of the book. As I mentioned above, Ohler's chief concern is in uncovering the specifics of medieval movement and travel. The reading section has some overlap with the earlier assignments from Verdon. This overlap is intentional; the students have an upcoming essay that asks them to compare two essays on the same basic topic. Ohler and Verdon take very different approaches to the same themes, and they come away with somewhat different conclusions. These differences provide a space for a class discussion which should serve the students well as they work on their own essays. The week wraps up with selections from two 15<sup>th</sup> century pilgrims, William Wey and Felix Fabri. These readings highlight some of the challenges faced by medieval travelers. Wey's writings give detailed instructions for coin exchange across Europe and provide a helpful guide for speaking basic phrases in the major languages along the route. The Fabri readings, taken from Whalen, provide an

window into some problems that students might not have thought about (such as how one uses the bathroom, in the middle of the night, over the side of a ship on storm-tossed seas).

### **Week 11: Wayfinding**

The readings in this week are dedicated to learning the specifics of how people found their way across the world. The most important reading for the week is Ruth Evan's essay on wayfinding. Evans asks how travelers might have progressed through unfamiliar terrain without the tools that we tend to take for common at this point. She considers issues such as language barriers, map literacy and the process of asking for directions. Her essay provides asks a series of workaday questions about medieval travel which often go unasked, and her work should compel students to think more granularly about the "hows" of medieval travel. Caherine Delano-Smith's essay brings maps and mapmaking to the fore, and should help students to understand why maps and map literacy were not important parts of the medieval traveler's toolkit. Finally, Sara Schechner's piece asks – following in part from Chaucer's book on the subject -- whether or not astrolabes might have been used as commonplace tools for medieval wayfinding. Her conclusion is that the tools were almost certainly not in common use. Our class will give closer consideration to this conclusion in the following week.

### **Week 12: Wayfinding; Ships and Shipping**

The first day of the week is a conclusion to the Wayfinding subsection. Students are assigned to read Dominic Ford's essay on the construction and use of astrolabes. Ford also provides, through his website, a template for making your own astrolabe ([Link](#)). I will print out these templates and bring them to class, along with cardboard and brads. Students are required to bring scissors. Together we will make the model astrolabes and then go outside to try to use them.

This should occasion a continued discussion of some of the points raised by Schechner, and should give students some small taste of the problems involved in using an astrolabe as a travel aid.

Further, I am hopeful that the process of putting the models together and learning how to use them will allow students to come away from the class knowing the device's different parts and purposes.

The second half of the week looks at ships and shipping. The readings from Dotson, Hutchinson and Unger all address issues of ship construction. John Dotson's essay looks at Mediterranean shipbuilding and examines the slow process by which evolutions in the process eventually transformed the use and production of medieval galleys. Gillian Hutchinson takes a somewhat archeological approach to medieval ships, and her text offers a range of specifics about sailing. Richard Unger's essay is primarily concerned with changes in shipbuilding technology in the European north. Taken together, these three readings should provide students with a basic knowledge of ship types and the ways that shipbuilding changed over the medieval period. These essays, just like the issue of the English colonization of Ireland, should provide a space for thinking about Early Modern echoes of the medieval. The week also includes a brief selection from William Wey in which Wey gives advice for travelers at sea.

### **Week 13: Roads and Bridges**

The focus of this week is on the role played by built infrastructure in encouraging and enabling traveling. The two readings in the first part of the week are from the excellent Shire Archeology series. Each book is relatively short and easy to read, but highly informative. Paul Hindle's *Medieval Roads and Tracks* is especially engaging thanks to the author's work in using the known travels of King John to work out highways and rural tracks. The second half of the week asks the students to think about the role of roads in various contexts. Dylan Evans' piece examines the importance of roads and travel infrastructure in colonial endeavors by looking at Norman

strategic use of roads in attempting to subdue Wales. Michelle Duran-McLure writes about the pilgrim road to Rome and the effects that it had on a town like Siena that sat astride the highway. And lastly, Marjorie Boyer challenges the long-held idea of bridgebuilding monastic orders. Taken together, the readings for this week aim to convey the importance of roads as historical actors, and to get students thinking about the processes by which the infrastructural demands of land-based traffic.

This week brings with it the last set of assigned reading for the semester. The next week is Thanksgiving and, as noted above, the Tuesday class is dedicated to an final project workshop. The week after Thanksgiving is set aside for final project presentations.