

The Medieval Magazine

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The Top 50 Medieval Books of 2015

12th-century castle
discovered in England



Offa, King of Mercia



Star Wars and the Middle Ages



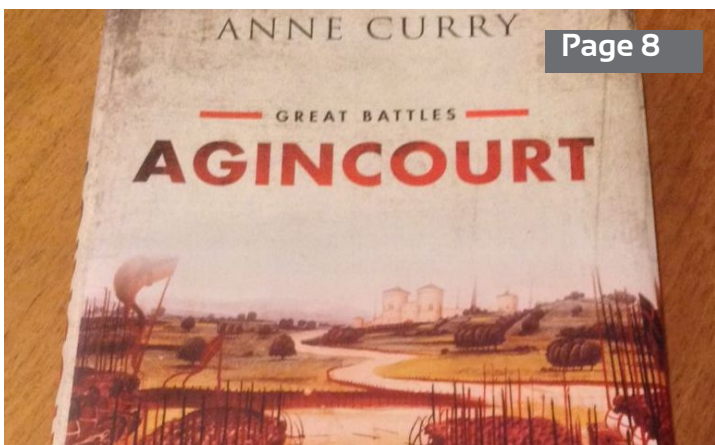
The Story of Exodus (Anglo-Saxon Version)



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12th century castle discovered in England

Archaeologists working in Gloucester have discovered the remains of a 12th-century castle. The find was made on the site of a former prison.



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Top 50 Books in Medieval Studies of 2015

Our list of the best of the year!



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Offa, King of Mercia

Susan Abernethy profiles the Anglo-Saxon monarch



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Star Wars and the Middle Ages

The two most significant influences are in how the original trilogy has many similarities to Arthurian legends and how Jedi Knights are modelled on medieval warriors.

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Monday.

Cover Photo: Some of the books on our
2015 list



Twelfth-century castle discovered in England

Archaeologists working in Gloucester have discovered the remains of a 12th-century castle. The find was made on the site of a former prison.

Cotswold Archaeology announced the find on their **website** last week. They believe the castle was built between 1110 and 1120, and "was a large structure, with the keep, which we have now located in our work, an inner bailey and stables. The keep was surrounded by a series of concentric defences which comprised curtain walls and ditches, with the drawbridge and gatehouse lying outside the current site to the north."

The keep is believed to have been 30 metres long and 20 metres wide, and had walls as thick as 12 feet. Neil Holbrook, chief executive of Cotswold Archaeology, told the **Western Press Daily**, "I am surprised by what we found. I knew there was a castle but I had expected more of it to have been destroyed." He added the size and design would have been comparable to the Tower of London. "It would have been a powerful symbol of Norman architecture," he said. "As you came to Gloucester you would have seen the cathedral and the castle, which is representative of how important the city was in Norman Britain."

The archaeologists have so far discovered nearly 900 objects, including medieval pottery and a six-sided die made of bone.

It was believed that the castle had been destroyed in the 18th century when a prison was built on the site, but it seems that the gaol was built over the medieval structure. The prison was in use until 2013 and is set

for redevelopment. News of the discovery is leading to calls that the site be preserved. Paul James, Leader of Gloucester City Council explained to the **Gloucester Citizen**, "Whatever is done on site needs to be sensitive to the heritage of both the castle and the listed buildings there. We are fortunate that we have a developer that cares about the heritage of the site. Having glass flooring above it, allowing visitors to see through might be a possibility. The most important matter is to preserve it well, the walls have been here for hundreds of years and we want them here for hundreds more."



Photo by Mark Price / Cotswold Archaeology

Archaeologists unearth new evidence of Roman and medieval Leicester

University of Leicester team reveals insights into Roman and medieval domestic life beneath former city centre bus depot

Archaeologists from University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) have unearthed new evidence of Roman and medieval Leicester after recently completing the excavation of two areas at the former Southgates Bus Depot, on the corner of Southgates and Peacock Lane in the centre of Leicester.

Archaeologists, led by John Thomas and Mathew Morris of ULAS, have been investigating a series of medieval and post-medieval backyards dating from the 12th century through to the 16th century. These are likely to be associated with densely packed houses and shops which would have once fronted onto the important medieval street of Southgates.

Evidence recorded includes stone-lined pits (possibly storage pits or cisterns), rubbish pits, latrines, wells, boundary walls and a possible late 15th or 16th century cellar. Such activity, and the evidence carefully collected and recorded from it, will give important new insights into the lifestyles and industry of the people living along one of Leicester's principal medieval streets.

John Thomas said: "Having the chance to excavate in this part of Leicester is fantastic. Because of the historic nature of the modern city centre, archaeologists rarely get the

opportunity to explore this part of the city. These excavations will provide important new insights into the character of the settlement and the inhabitants living in the southern half of the Roman and medieval town."

The project is funded by property developer Viridis and the University team has been working closely with them and their contractors WinVic to complete the archaeological investigation before construction of new student apartments begins.

The site lies at the heart of Leicester's historic core, close to significant Roman and medieval sites such as the Roman forum and the Jewry Wall Roman public baths as well as the site of Grey Friars, the medieval Franciscan friary where the remains of King Richard III (d.1485) were discovered by University archaeologists in 2012.

Once the medieval archaeology was painstakingly recorded and removed, evidence of Leicester's Roman past was slowly revealed. The junction of two Roman streets has been identified. These have thick, cambered gravel surfaces with drainage gullies dug to either side. A number of large stone and timber buildings, and boundary walls, dating from the 2nd century through



Late Roman industrial features are painstakingly excavated and recorded by archaeologists before building work begins. Photo credit University of Leicester

stone and timber buildings, and boundary walls, dating from the 2nd century through to the 4th century have been identified running along the sides of the streets.

In some areas the Roman archaeology has been badly disturbed by later activity but elsewhere Roman remains are very well preserved with intact floors and rare fragments of wall still surviving above floor level. The broken remains of a mosaic pavement has been found in one building, whilst pieces of painted wall plaster still survived on the walls in another.

This evidence will allow the archaeologists to reconstruct what these buildings might have looked like. A wide array of artefacts have been recovered during the excavation, including coins, fine table ware, a copper spoon, game counters, a number of bone hair pins and other pieces of jewellery. This suggests that Roman activity in the area was predominately domestic in nature with some

industrial activity going on in the vicinity in the later Roman period.

Mathew Morris added: "This part of Roman Leicester is very poorly understood because there has been little previous archaeological investigation in the vicinity. One of the Roman streets found on the site has never been seen before in Leicester and isn't on any of our plans of the Roman city. This is a significant find and raises exciting new questions about the layout of the early Roman town and how it evolved through the Roman period. It also means that the excavations are exploring three different insulae or blocks within the Roman street system. So far, there appears to be contrasting types of occupation in the different areas and this will give terrific new insights into life in Leicester during the Roman period."

Isidore of Seville on...

Books

Isidore of Seville's, 7th-century work *Etymologiae*, even covers some games and sports. Here is what he writes about books and bookmaking:

Bookmaking (*De libris conficiendis*)

Among the pagans, certain categories of books were made in fixed sizes. Poems and epistles were in a smaller format, but histories were written in a larger size. They were made not only on papyrus sheets or on parchment, but also on the intestinal membranes of elephants or on the interwoven leaves of mallows or palms.

The terminology of books (*De librorum vocabulis*)

A codex is composed of many books; a book is of one scroll. It is called a codex (*codex*) by way of metaphor from the trunks (*codex*) of trees or vines, as if it were a wooden stock (*caudex*, i.e. an older form of the word *codex*), because it contains in itself a multitude of books, as it were of branches. A scroll (*volumen*) is a book so called from rolling (*volvere*), as we speak of the scrolls of the Law and the scrolls of the Prophets among the Hebrews. 3. Liber is the inner membrane of bark, which clings to the wood. With regard to this, Vergil thus:

The bark (liber) clings to the high elm.

Whence what we write on is called a book (*liber*) because before the use of papyrus sheets or parchment, scrolls were made – that is, joined together – from the inner bark of trees. Whence those who write are called copyists (*librarius*) after the bark of trees.

The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville has been edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, and was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006

Click here to visit the Publisher's website for more details

The Top 50 Books in Medieval Studies of 2015

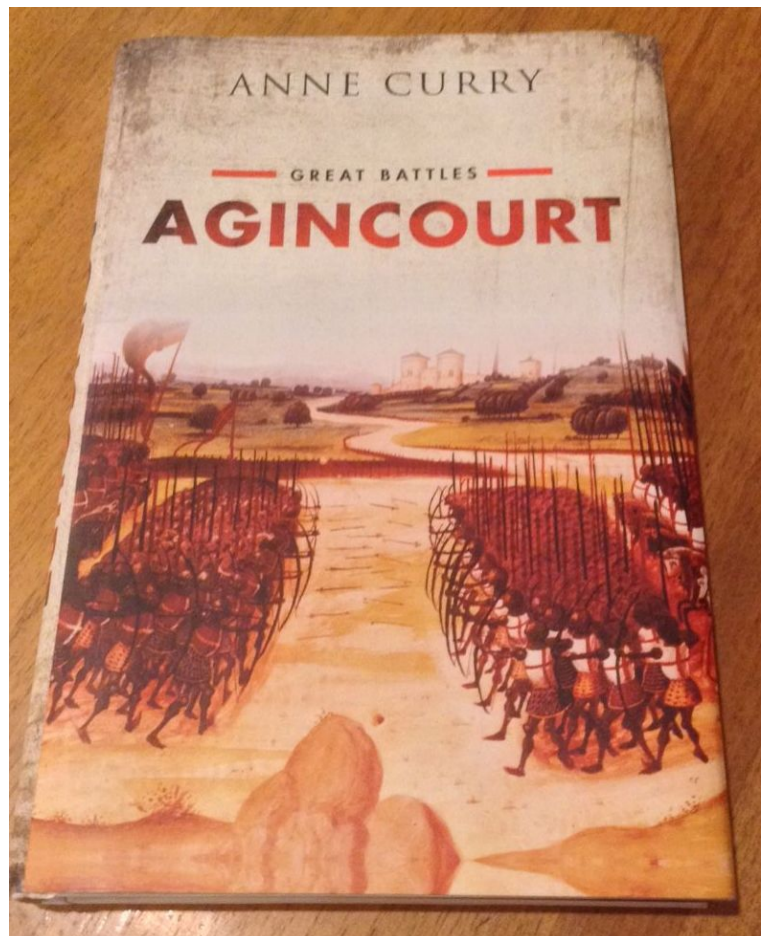
Hundreds of books are published each year in the field of medieval studies. We wanted to create a list of the best 50 books of this year - what we think will be the books that will make the most impact on readers, not just this year, but over the next generation. Books that will inspire, educate, and change what we know about the Middle Ages.

Our Top 5

1. *Agincourt*

By Anne Curry
Oxford University Press

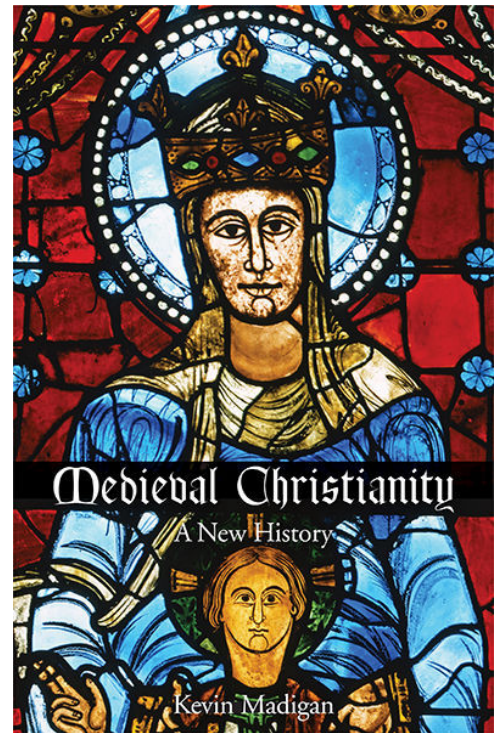
What puts this book at the top of our list? Commemorating the 600th anniversary of one of the most well known battles of the Middle Ages, this book is written by the leading historian on the topic, and deals not only with the battle itself, but the many ways it has been interpreted and remembered since. This will likely be the most important book on the battle until the 700th anniversary.



2. *Medieval Christianity: A New History*

By Kevin Madigan
Yale University Press

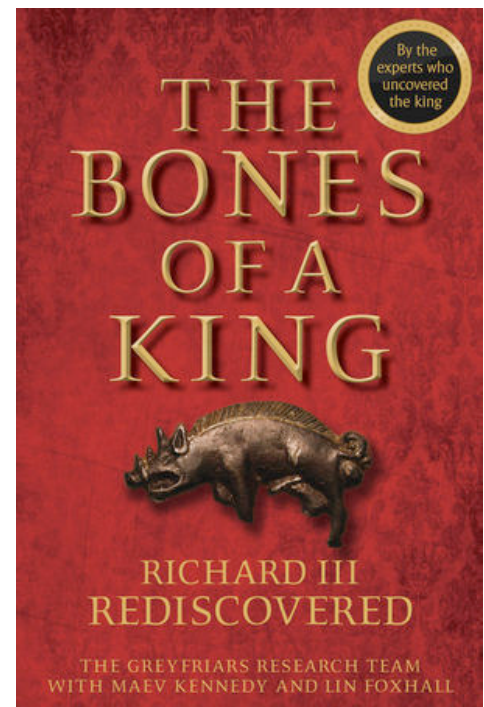
"Medieval Christianity may be, on some surface levels, the textbook its author calls it, but it's also much more than that, a narrative history of the first quality, a probing research and well-written account of the most appallingly successful theocracy in history. Madigan captures the power of it all and also the multifaceted humanity of it all, and he does it in a way the curious general reader, not just the poor overworked undergraduate, will find page-turningly fascinating. If you want one rock-solid book on Church history, this is it." - Steve Donoghue in *Open Letters Monthly*



3. *The Bones of a King: Richard III Rediscovered*

The Greyfriars Research Team, with Maev Kennedy and Lin Foxhall.
Wiley Blackwell

The official behind-the-scenes account of one of the most important archaeological discoveries in English history. Those who were part of the University of Leicester team write about how Richard III was discovered, how he was identified, what they learned about his remains, and how he was finally laid to rest at Leicester Cathedral.



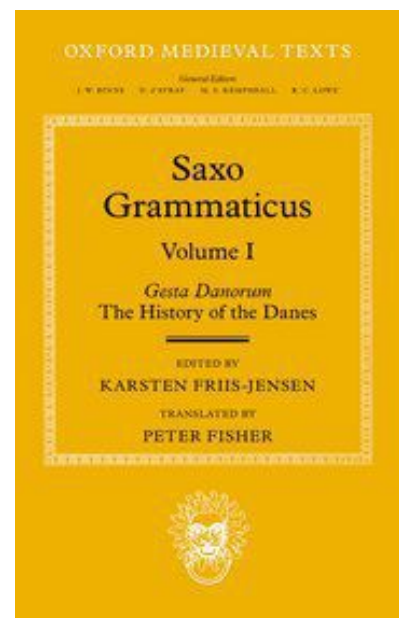
We divided this list into several categories, beginning with the top 5 books of the year. Then we group the remaining 45 into various sections - religion, politics, biographies, and more. Several factors go into this list - how influential the book will be among scholars, how widely will it be read by students and the general public, and does it offer new and interesting insights? It will be interesting to look back on this list in 5, 10 or 25 years time, and see which of these books will still be influential for medievalists.



4. *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*

Edited by Karsten Friis-Jensen and translated by Peter Fisher
Clarendon Press

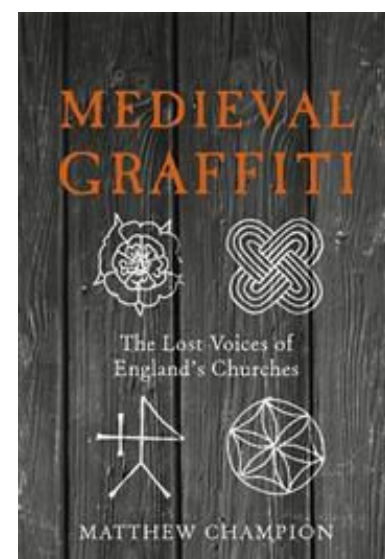
While Saxo Grammaticus' work is a crucially important primary source, not only for the medieval Baltic world, but also for understanding the pre-Christian culture of northern Europe. This is the first complete translation of the *Gesta Danorum*, and the two volumes offer over 1600 pages of reading. It should spark renewed interest in the text for decades to come.



5. *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches*

By Matthew Champion
Ebury Press

This book reveals a vast wealth of history that has remain unseen for hundreds of years. The award-winning work done by Matthew Champion and the Medieval Graffiti Survey is just the start, as it opens up a new field of potential research that will attract historians and the general public to see what can be found in their local churches.

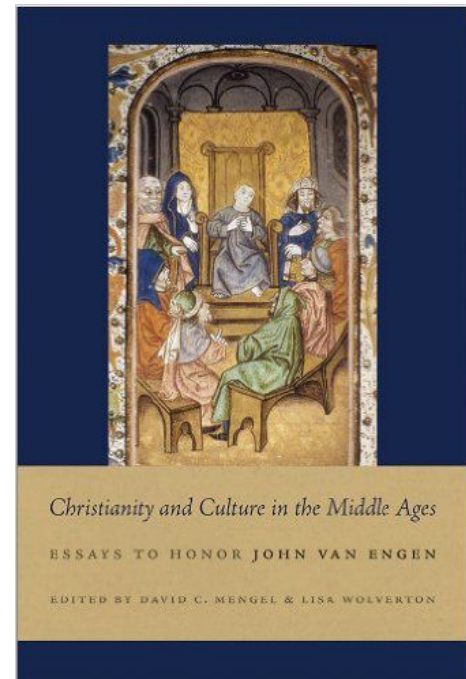


Religious Life in the Middle Ages

Christianity and culture in the Middle Ages: Essays to honor John Van Engen

Edited by David Mengal and Lisa Wolverton
University of Notre Dame Press

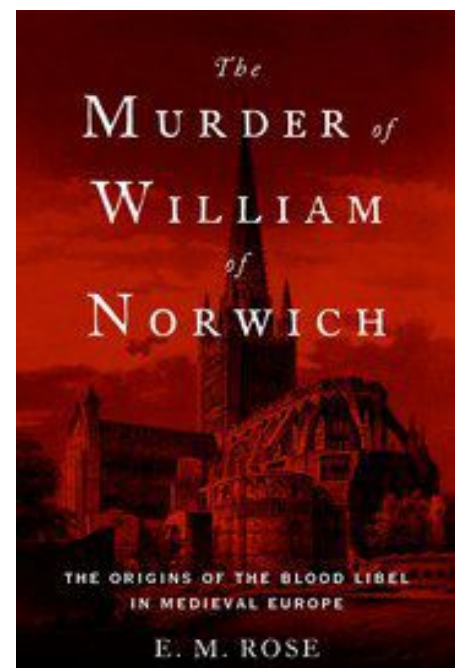
"Here is a collection as multifaceted as the scholar it honors. John Van Engen came to prominence as a force for renewal in the study of medieval religious and intellectual culture. How well he succeeded is written on every page by luminaries of his generation to rising stars of the future, many his former students. Every medievalist will find something of value here. Highly recommended." - James Murray, the Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University



The murder of William of Norwich : the origins of the blood libel in medieval Europe

By E. M. Rose
Oxford University Press

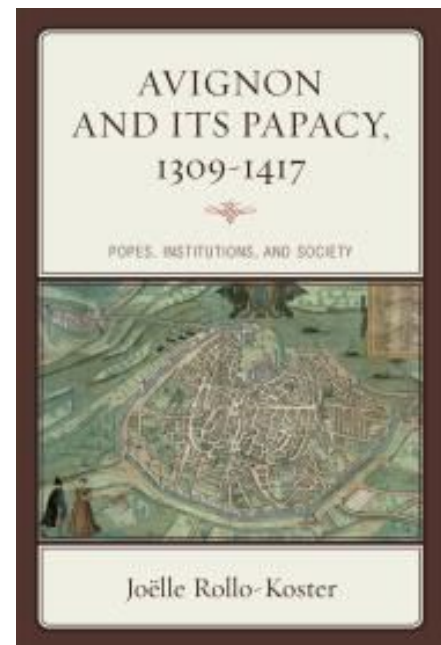
"E.M. Rose's book on the murder of William of Norwich is a breathtaking work of revision that addresses one of the central questions in the history of Christian/Jewish relations in the Middle Ages, a topic of enormous relevance in the contemporary world and one around which there is considerable scholarly contestation. The book is a brilliant piece of historical investigation and a marvelous read as well." - Gabrielle Spiegel, Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University



Avignon and Its Papacy, 1309–1417: Popes, Institutions, and Society

By Joëlle Rollo-Koster
Rowman & Littlefield

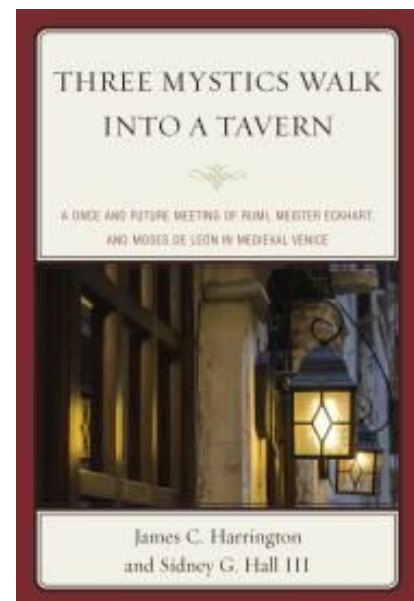
From the publisher: "With the arrival of Clement V in 1309, seven popes ruled the Western Church from Avignon until 1378. Joëlle Rollo-Koster traces the compelling story of the transplanted papacy in Avignon, the city the popes transformed into their capital. Through an engaging blend of political and social history, she argues that we should think more positively about the Avignon papacy, with its effective governance, intellectual creativity, and dynamism. It is a remarkable tale of an institution growing and defending its prerogatives, of people both high and low who produced and served its needs, and of the city they built together."



Three mystics walk into a tavern: a once and future meeting of Rumi, Meister Eckhart, and Moses de Léon in Medieval Venice

By James C. Harrington and Sydney G. Hall
Hamilton Books

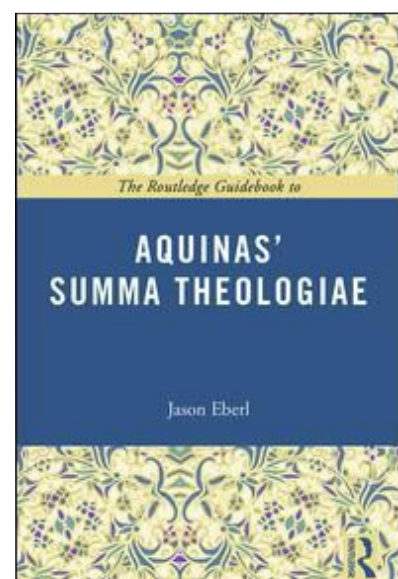
The award for best title of the year would go to this book, an imaginary take on having three of the greatest mystics of all time meet in Venice for an imaginary night-long conversation. It will be an interesting read for those interested in theology and mysticism.



The Routledge guidebook to Aquinas' Summa Theologiae

By Jason T. Eberl
Routledge

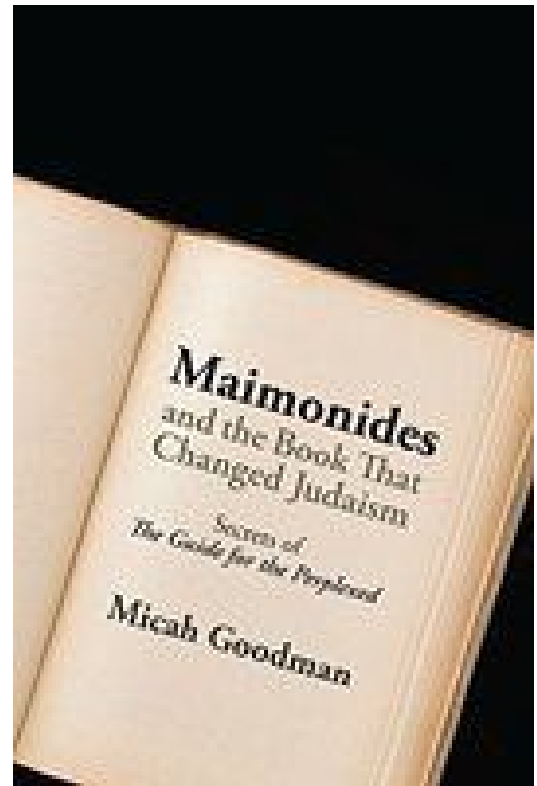
'This book is an admirably clear and helpful introduction to the *Summa Theologiae*. Anyone new to this seminal text or even those who have studied the *Summa* previously will find Eberl's guidebook refreshing and logical.' review by Barry Craig, St. Thomas University



Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism Secrets of "The Guide for the Perplexed"

By Micah Goodman
University of Nebraska Press

A publishing sensation long at the top of the best-seller lists in Israel, the original Hebrew edition of *Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism* has been called the most successful book ever published in Israel on the preeminent medieval Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides. The works of Maimonides, particularly *The Guide for the Perplexed*, are reckoned among the fundamental texts that influenced all subsequent Jewish philosophy and also proved to be highly influential in Christian and Islamic thought.



[Click here to read an excerpt](#)

Primary Sources

Reynard the Fox : a new translation

By James Simpson
Liveright Books

Translated for the first time in over a century, this new edition will likely generate new interest into the famous medieval stories.

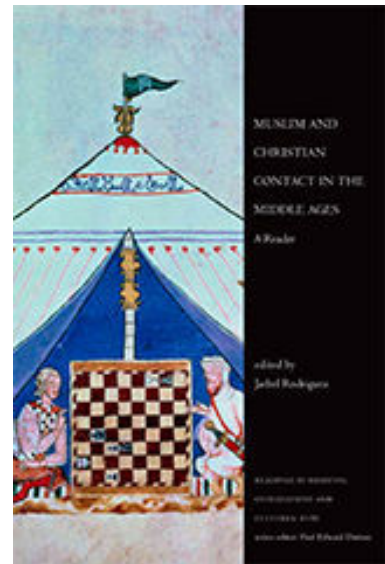
"In these riotous pages, Reynard lies, cheats, or eats anyone and anything that he crosses paths with, conning the likes of Tybert the Cat, Bruin the Bear, and Bellin the Ram, among others. Reynard's rapacious nature and constant "stealing and roving" eventually bring him into conflict with the court of the less-than-perceptive Noble the Lion and the brutal Isengrim the Wolf, pitting cunning trickery against brute force. Unlike the animal fables of Aesop, which uses small narratives to teach schoolboy morality, *Reynard the Fox* employs a dark and outrageous sense of humor to puncture the hypocritical authority figures of the "civilized" order, as the rhetorically brilliant fox outwits all comers by manipulating their bottomless greed."



Muslim and Christian Contact in the Middle Ages : A Reader

Edited by Jarbel Rodriguez
University of Toronto Press

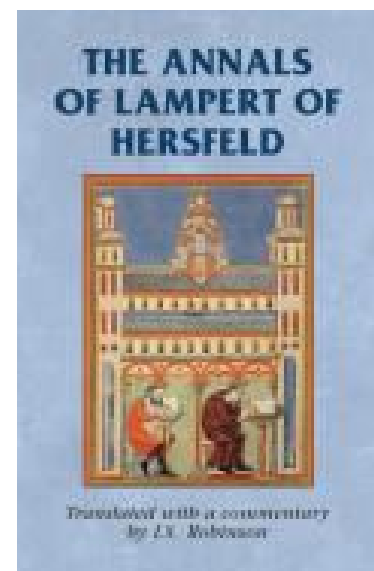
A book that will likely find its way into many undergraduate courses about the Middle Ages, over 80 texts are offered that look at how Christians and Muslims interacted with each other during the medieval period.



The Annals of Lampert of Hersfeld

Translated by I.S. Robinson
Manchester University Press

I.S. Robinson and Manchester University Press have worked together to publish translations of some of the important sources related to Germany's medieval history, and this book is perhaps the most useful of all. Lampert of Hersfeld account of events in the 11th century is often cited by scholars what was happening between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV in the Investiture Controversy, all recorded by 'the unrivalled master among medieval historians' and 'a superb story-teller'.



The Battle of Crécy: A Casebook

Edited by Michael Livingston and Kelly De Vries
Liverpool University Press

This book would make our list just for its first section - edited and translated excerpts of over 80 accounts of the famous battle from the Hundred Years War. The second section even adds more - several essays that will change scholarship about this battle.

The Battle of Crécy A Casebook

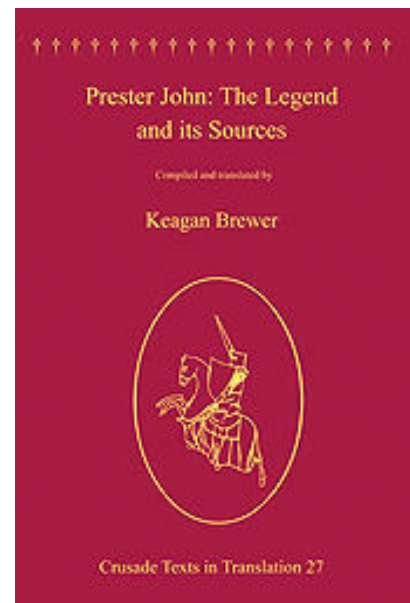


edited by
MICHAEL LIVINGSTON
and
KELLY DEVRIES

Prester John: The Legend and its Sources

By Keagan Brewer
Ashgate

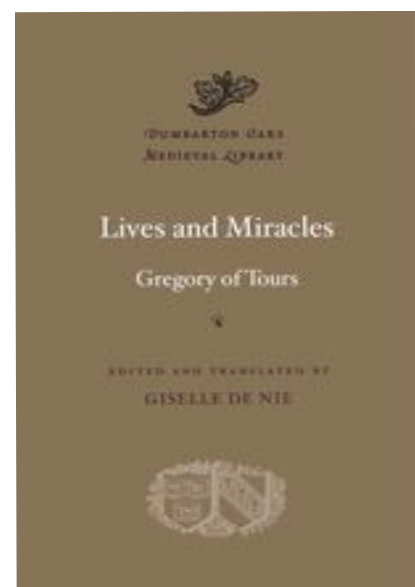
Perhaps one of the last books from the great series *Crusade Texts in Translation* from Ashgate Publishing, this book offers translations of sources about the legendary Christian king that range from the 12th century to 18th.



Lives and miracles of Gregory, Bishop of Tours

Edited and translated by Giselle de Nie
Harvard University Press

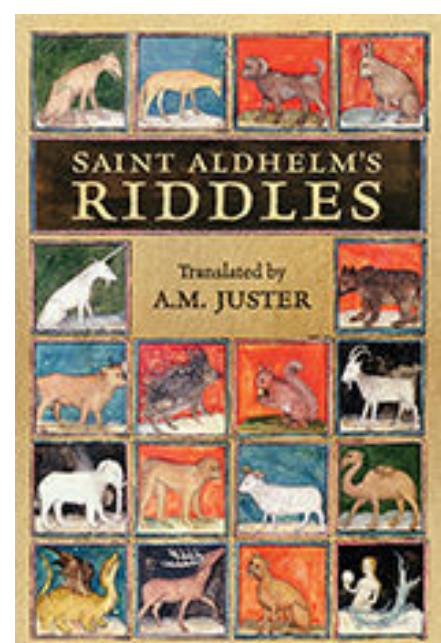
Gregory of Tours is mostly known for his *History of the Franks*, but this book, offering three more texts - *The Life of the Fathers*, *The Miracles of the Martyr Julian*, and *The Miracles of Bishop Martin* - will be a very useful edition for those interested in the Merovingians.



Saint Aldhelm's Riddles

Translated by A.M. Juster
University of Toronto Press

"There has always been a kind of riddle that, by reason of wit and beauty, is undeniably a poem. Bishop Aldhelm was a great continuator of the tradition, and A.M. Juster has given us Aldhelm in spirited and accurate verse translations. Among my favourite are the riddles for organ, squid, dove, and mouser, but Juster has handsomely rendered them all." - Richard Wilbur, second United States poet laureate

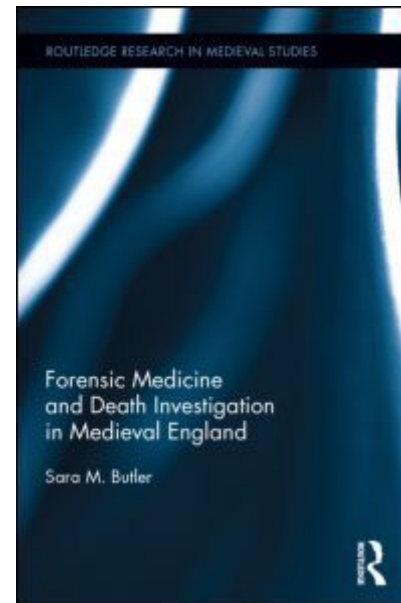


Science and Medicine

Forensic medicine and death investigation in medieval England

By Sara Butler
Routledge

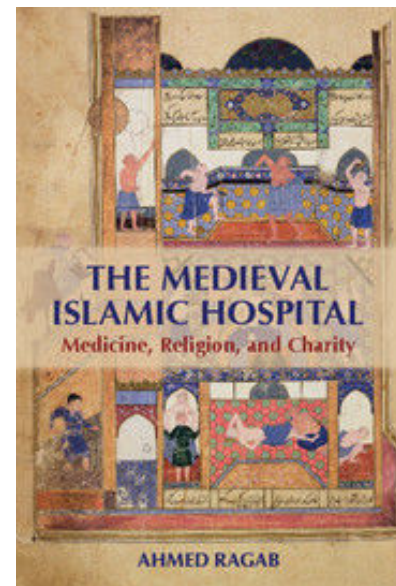
"This book is highly readable by advanced undergraduates and will be enjoyable for all scholars of medieval law and medicine. Specialists in medieval gender history and disease history will enjoy this volume in part or in whole. Certainly it offers a clear explanation of how the office of the medieval coroner operated, how the jury was put together and worked with the coroner, and how as a team they effectively came to conclusions concerning victims and perpetrators." - Wendy Turner in *The Medieval Review*



The Medieval Islamic Hospital: Medicine, Religion, and Charity

By Ahmed Ragab
Cambridge University Press

From the publisher: "The first monograph on the history of Islamic hospitals, this volume focuses on the under-examined Egyptian and Levantine institutions of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. By the twelfth century, hospitals serving the sick and the poor could be found in nearly every Islamic city. Ahmed Ragab traces the varying origins and development of these institutions, locating them in their urban environments and linking them to charity networks and patrons' political projects. "

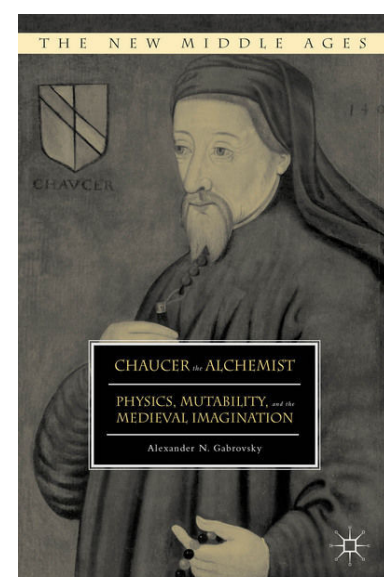


Chaucer the Alchemist: Physics, Mutability, and the Medieval Imagination

By Alexander N. Gabrovsky
Palgrave Macmillan

While many books on Chaucer are published each year, this one might stand out of the crowd - Gabrovsky some of the scientific aspects to Chaucer's writings.

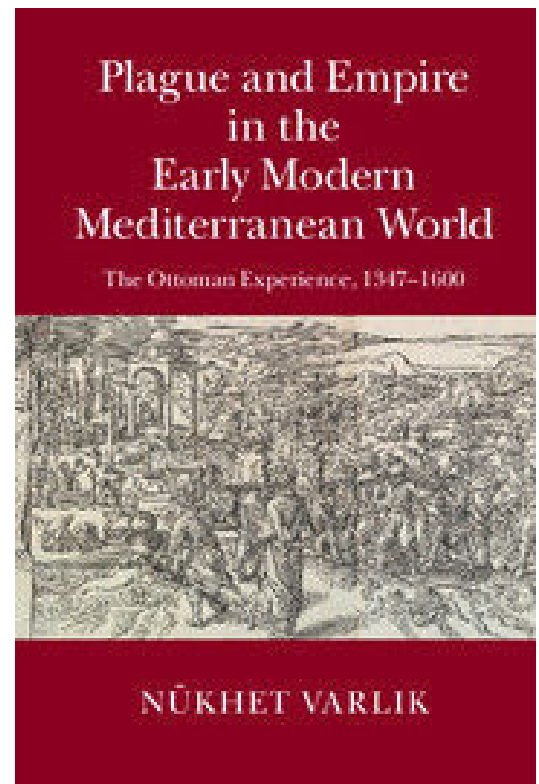
[Click here to read the first chapter](#)



Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman experience, 1347-1600

By Nükhet Varlik
Cambridge University Press

This is the first systematic scholarly study of the Ottoman experience of plague during the Black Death pandemic and the centuries that followed. Using a wealth of archival and narrative sources, including medical treatises, hagiographies, and travelers' accounts, as well as recent scientific research, Nükhet Varlik demonstrates how plague interacted with the environmental, social, and political structures of the Ottoman Empire from the late medieval through the early modern era.



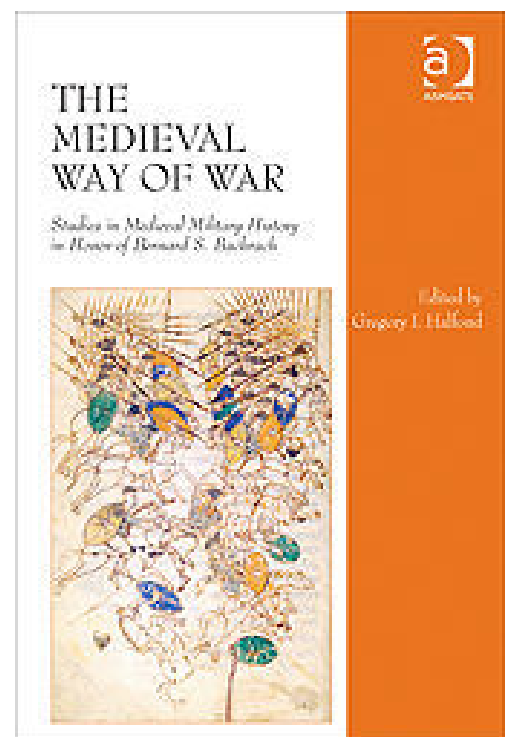
Military History

The Medieval Way of War: Studies in Medieval Military History in Honor of Bernard S. Bachrach

Edited by Gregory Halford
Ashgate Publishing

The 17 contributors to this book make up the Who's Who List of medieval military historians: Richard Abels, Kelly DeVries, John France, John Gillingham, Stephen Morillo and Michael Prestwich, to name a few.

"A book like this, written in honor of a specific historian whose writings have been important in military history, will be most interesting to students of Medieval Military History. That said, these essays are broad enough to interest readers who are interested in battle studies, religious history, art history, the relationship between war and society, or those who enjoy biographical sketches of notable and important historical personages. The broader one's appreciation of Medieval history, the more one will find of interest here." - Nathan Albright reviewing for De Re Militari



Northern Europe

Into the ocean: Vikings, Irish, and Environmental Change in Iceland and the North

By Kristján Ahronson
University of Toronto Press

This book will rewrite the history of Iceland, as Ahronson presents a convincing case of an Irish settlement on the island a century before the arrival of the Vikings.

The Edge of the World A Cultural History of the North Sea and the Transformation of Europe

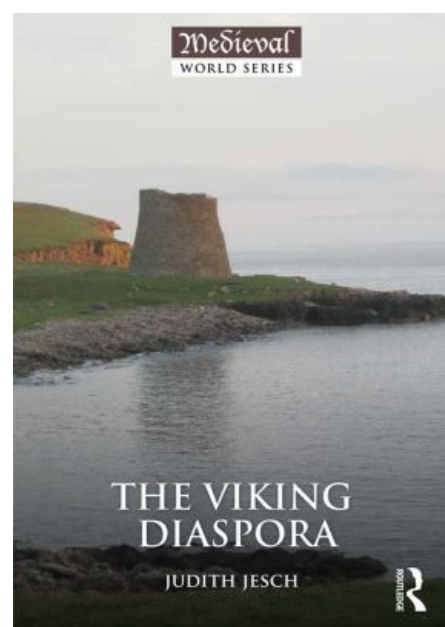
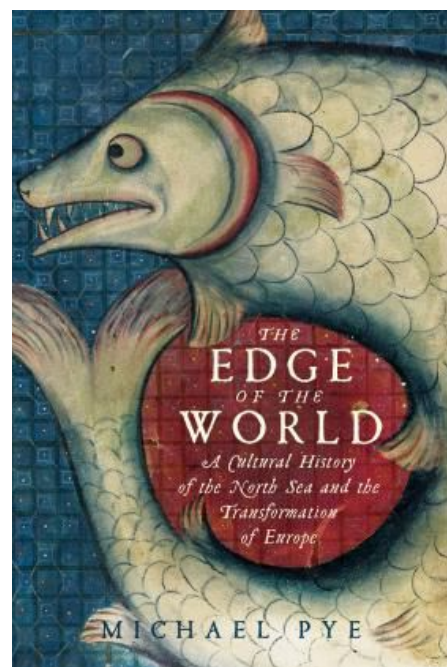
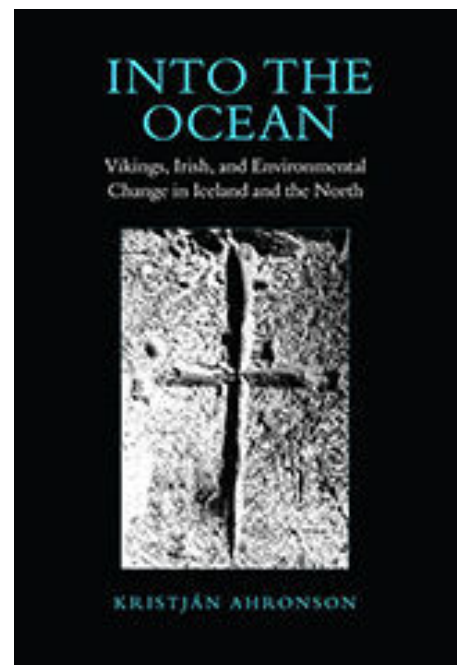
By Michael Pye
Pegasus Books

"Michael Pye's new book is bristling, wide-ranging and big-themed. It's the sort of historical work whose thesis is virtually impossible to prove, but it's also a reminder that history isn't an exact science. At its most meaningful, history involves a good deal of art and storytelling. Pye's book is full of both." - Russell Shorto, reviewing in the *New York Times*

The Viking Diaspora

By Judith Jesch
Routledge

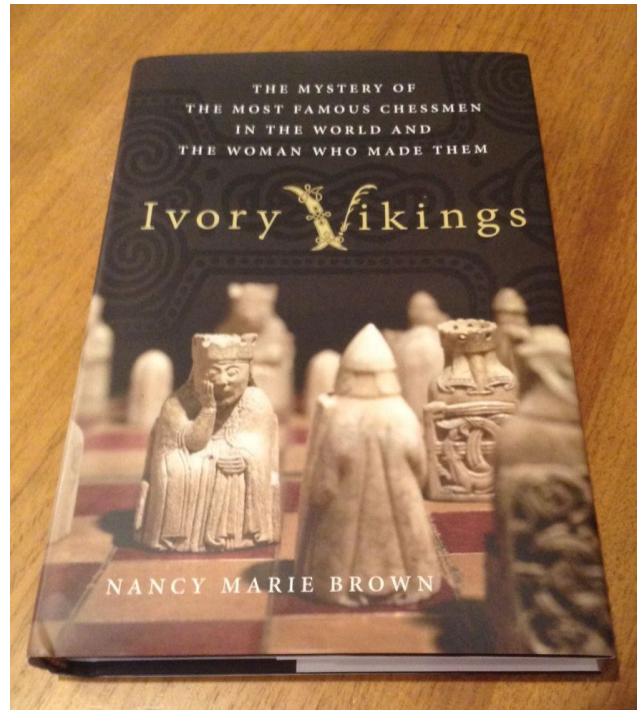
"Judith Jesch presents the Viking world from a geographical and environmental perspective. Who were the people, how many were they, where did they come from, where did they end up and which marks—physical as well as toponomic and onomastic did they set upon their surroundings and themselves. For instance: did they name their "new world" by transferring "old" names? Or did they zoom in on natural features trying to get their bearings? Or did they simply orient themselves in their new world by conflating their own personal names with that of their farm?" - Karen Schousboe on *Medieval Histories*



Ivory Vikings: the mystery of the most famous chessmen in the world and the woman who made them

By Nancy Marie Brown
St. Martin's Press

From the publisher's description: "In the early 1800's, on a Hebridean beach in Scotland, the sea exposed an ancient treasure cache: 93 chessmen carved from walrus ivory. Norse netsuke, each face individual, each full of quirks, the Lewis Chessmen are probably the most famous chess pieces in the world....Nancy Marie Brown's *Ivory Vikings* explores these mysteries by connecting medieval Icelandic sagas with modern archaeology, art history, forensics, and the history of board games."



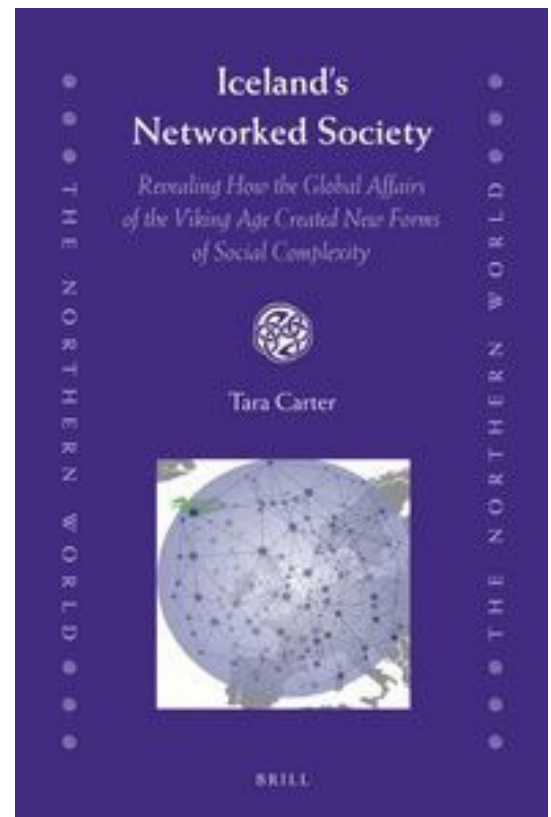
Watch Nancy Marie Brown speaking about her book



Iceland's Networked Society: Revealing How the Global Affairs of the Viking Age Created New Forms of Social Complexity

By Tara Carter
Brill

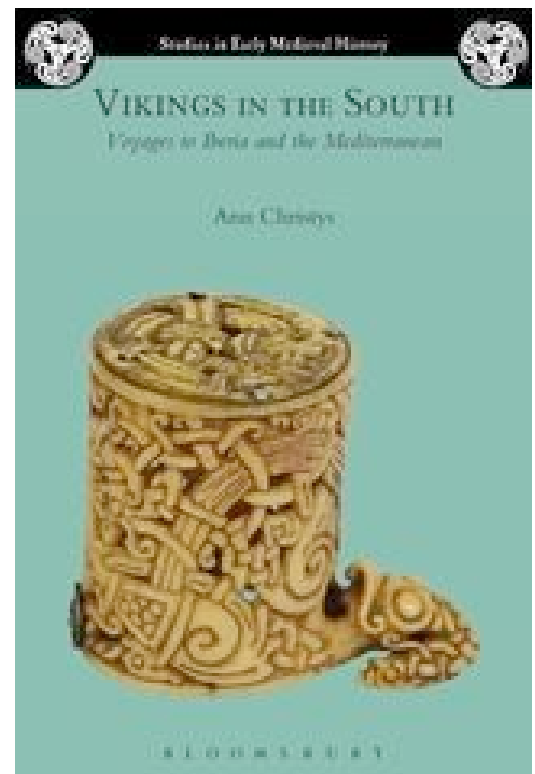
From the Publisher: "Linked by the politics of global trade networks, Viking Age Europe was a well-connected world. Within this fertile social environment, Iceland ironically has been casted as a marginal society too remote to participate in global affairs, and destined to live in the shadow of its more successful neighbours. Drawing on new archaeological evidence, Tara Carter challenges this view, arguing that by building strong social networks the first citizens of Iceland balanced thinking globally while acting locally, creating the first cosmopolitan society in the North Atlantic."



Vikings in the South: Voyages to Iberia and the Mediterranean

By Ann Christys
Bloomsbury Academic

"Ann Christys's concise and well-written book fills a real need; she has read carefully all relevant sources, in Arabic, Old Norse and Latin, concerning possible Viking visits to the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula in the ninth and tenth centuries, stripped away many romanticized details that have attached to the accounts over the years, and come up with a sober assessment: that there were indeed occasional such attacks, but the shock and fear which the Vikings generated in coastal areas of the Iberian Peninsula were lasting, and greater than the actual threat." – Roger Wright, University of Liverpool



The Crusades

Seven myths of the Crusades

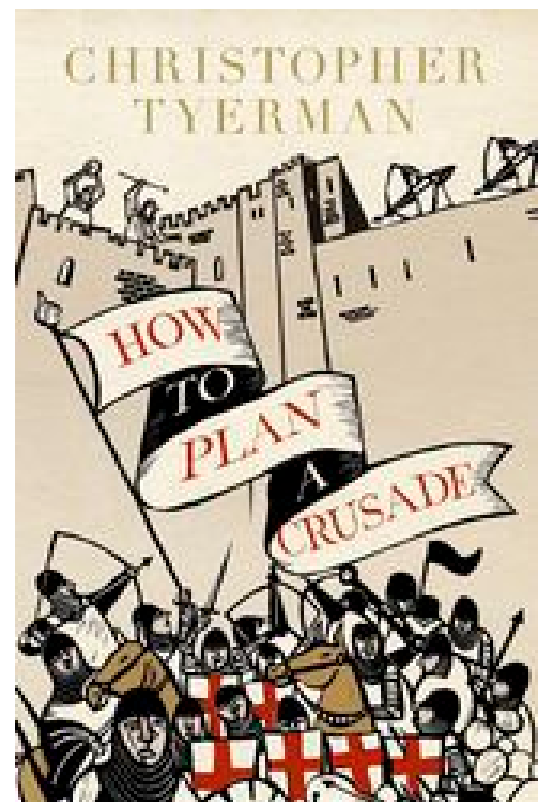
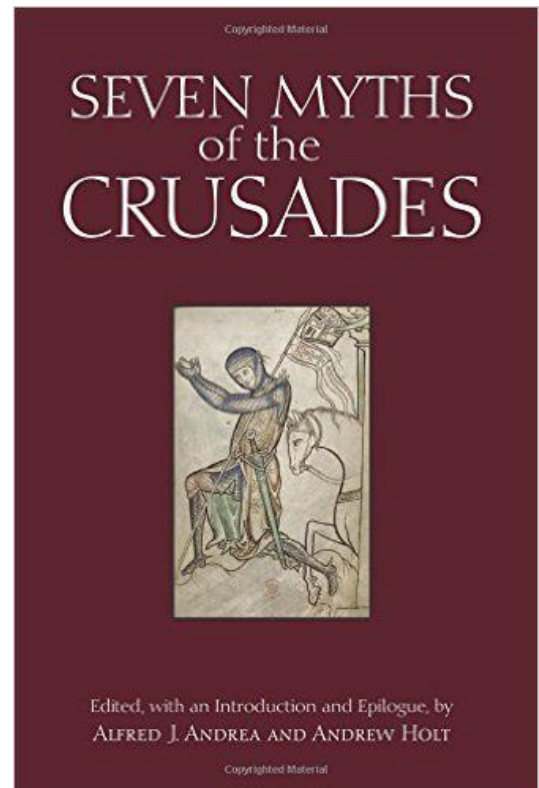
Edited by Alfred J. Andrea and Andrew Holt
Hackett Publishing Company

"We and the contributors all agreed that the prevalence of the myths that we address in this book are repeated so regularly in all media, especially popular films and literature, as well as in political speeches and commentary, that it was worthwhile to pull together a book, written and edited by scholars, that targets general readers and undergraduates. The goal is to explain to the reader why scholars tend to see the issues covered in the chapters quite differently than popular accounts often suggest. We wanted to give readers a sense of the complexity of each of the historical issues dealt within the chapters and why historians often disagree with common popular, often unnuanced interpretations of historical events. It is a topic that crusade historians discuss among themselves quite often, occasionally publishing articles in popular publications and on the web to make such a point to just such an audience."
- Andrew Holt in an interview with Medievalists.net

How to plan a crusade: reason and religious war in the High Middle Ages

By Christopher Tyerman
Allen Lane

"Christopher Tyerman is the author of outstanding books on the crusades, notably *God's War* (2006), which remains the best modern account of the whole subject. In *How to Plan a Crusade*, he tackles the whole question of crusade preparation. Much of the book is concerned with the way that crusading armies were recruited: why men joined up, how they found the money, how they persuaded their friends and dependents to come with them, how they arranged their affairs in their absence, how they pacified their irate wives. The rest deals with strategic and logistical planning, with shipping, with stores of food and water, with medical considerations, with weaponry, from daggers to prefabricated forts, with techniques of amphibious warfare and so on. It is a huge subject."
- review by Jonathan Sumption in *The Spectator*

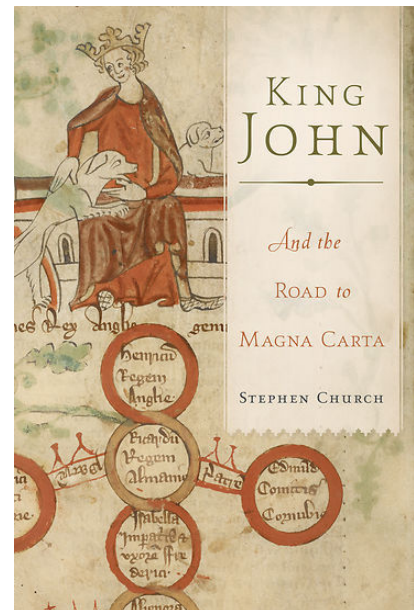


Medieval Politics

King John: And the Road to Magna Carta

By Stephen Church
Basic Books

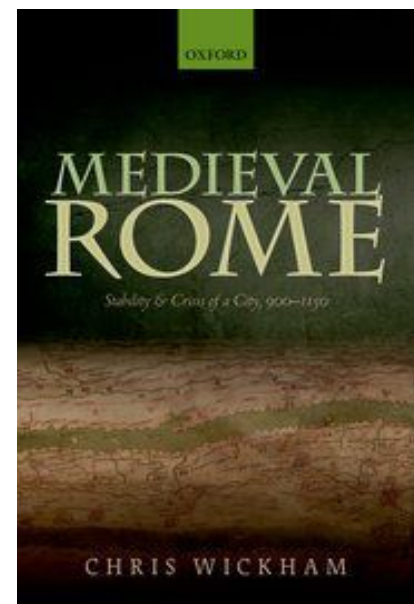
There were several books that came out this year about Magna Carta, but if we had to pick one that will be remembered in generations to come, it would be this one by Stephen Church, who has already developed a reputation as one of the leading scholars on the reign of King John.



Medieval Rome: Stability and Crisis of a City, 900-1150

By Chris Wickham
Oxford University Press

The first detailed history to cover this period of the city of Rome, this is one of two books written this year by Wickham, the Chichele Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oxford. His previous works have earned him prestigious awards, and he has been called "a medieval historian of exceptional distinction who has transformed our understanding of the early medieval Italian world."



The Middle Ages

By Johannes Fried
Harvard University Press

"Johannes Fried's *The Middle Ages* is an absolute must read for anybody with an interest in the Middle Ages."—Ignas, Kalpokas, LSE Review of Books

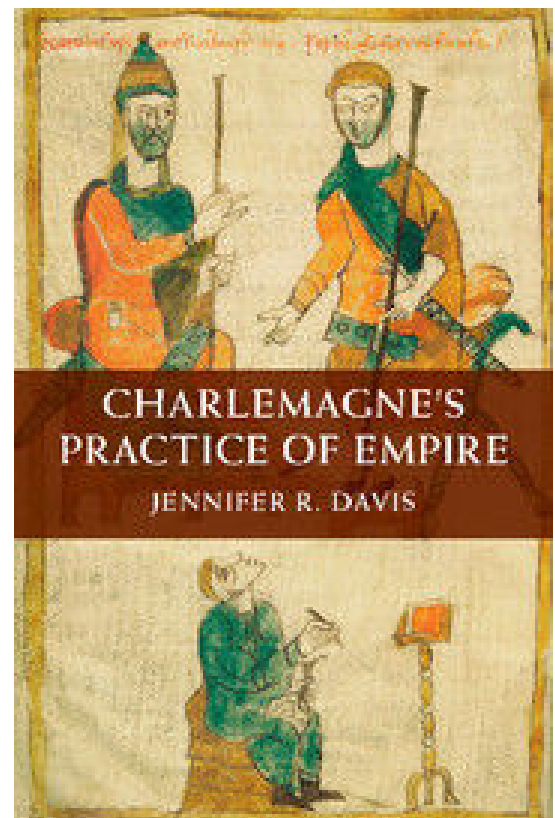
The only book on our list that is an overview of the Middle Ages as a whole, Fried's 632-page book begins with Boethius, Gregory the Great and Charlemagne, then moves on to discuss topics the political and ecclesiastical transformations that took place in medieval Europe.



Charlemagne's Practice of Empire

By Jennifer R. Davis
Cambridge University Press

From the publisher's description: "Revisiting one of the great puzzles of European political history, Jennifer Davis examines how the Frankish king Charlemagne and his men held together the vast new empire he created during the first decades of his reign. Davis explores how Charlemagne overcame the two main problems of ruling an empire, namely how to delegate authority and how to manage diversity. Through a meticulous reconstruction based on primary sources, she demonstrates that rather than imposing a pre-existing model of empire onto conquered regions, Charlemagne and his men learned from them, developing a practice of empire that allowed the emperor to rule on a European scale. As a result, Charlemagne's realm was more flexible and diverse than has long been believed. Telling the story of Charlemagne's rule using sources produced during the reign itself, Davis offers a new interpretation of Charlemagne's political practice, free from the distortions of later legend."



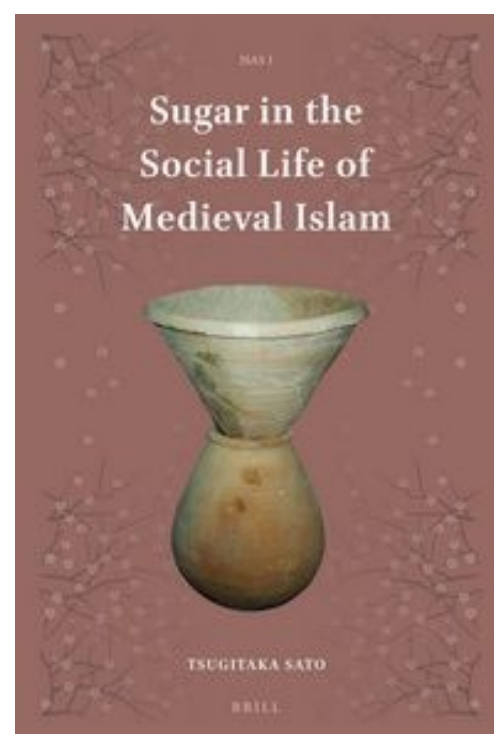
Social History and Daily Life

Sugar in the Social Life of Medieval Islam

By Tsugitaka Sato
Brill

More historians should be looking at this book as the template of how to explore under appreciated topics. "Drawing from a wealth of historical sources - chronicles, geographies, travel accounts, biographies, medical and pharmacological texts, and more - he describes sugarcane cultivation, sugar production, the sugar trade, and sugar's use as a sweetener, a medicine, and a symbol of power."

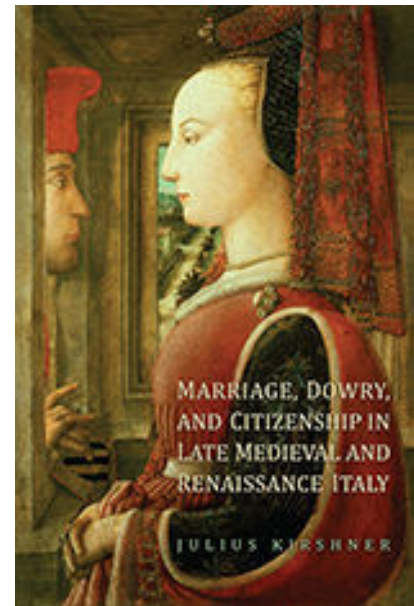
Sato's article **Sugar in the Economic Life of Mamluk Egypt** offers a taste of what you can find in the book



Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy

By Julius Kirshner
University of Toronto Press

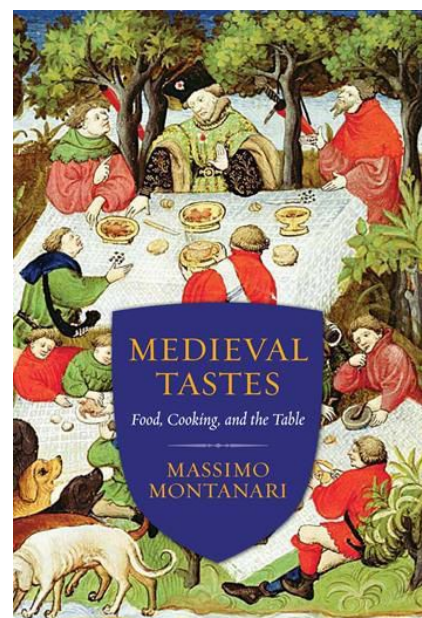
Through his research on the status of women in Florence and other Italian cities, Julius Kirshner helped to establish the socio-legal history of women in late medieval and Renaissance Italy and challenge the idea that Florentine women had an inferior legal position and civic status.



Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table

By Massimo Montanari
Columbia University Press

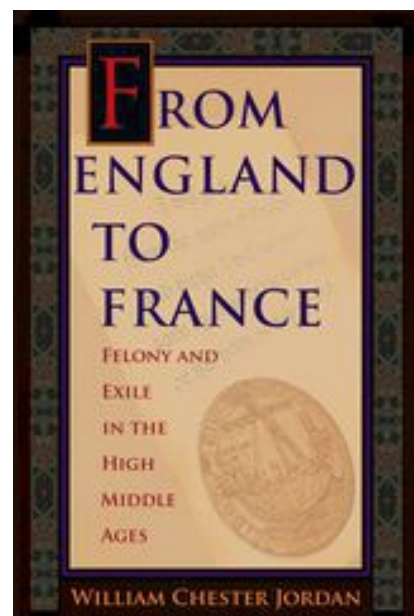
"if you're simply interested in a few Medieval food recipes, be warned: you won't find any here. But if you want to know what food people in the Middle Ages, particularly in Italy, ate and why, and how modern cooking was born, go right ahead. This book is a treasure trove of information on all things culinary in this intriguing era." - review from *History and Other Thoughts*



From England to France: Felony and exile in the High Middle Ages

By William Chester Jordan
Princeton University Press

"In a fascinating study, William Chester Jordan suggests that judicial exile, barely noted in previous histories of the law, was practised in a remarkably large number of cases—at least 75,000, he suggests—between 1180 and 1350. Abjuration takes its place alongside other means by which medieval society sought to soften the rigours of the law and allow those found guilty of felony to escape the hangman's noose." - Mark Ormrod, reviewing this book in *History Today*



Markets and marketplaces in Medieval Italy, c.1100 to c.1440

By Dennis Romano
Yale University Press

Fascinating details about how a medieval marketplace looked and operated - this book will appeal to those interested in daily life and business in the Middle Ages.

The Merchant of Prato's wife : Margherita Datini and her World, 1360-1423

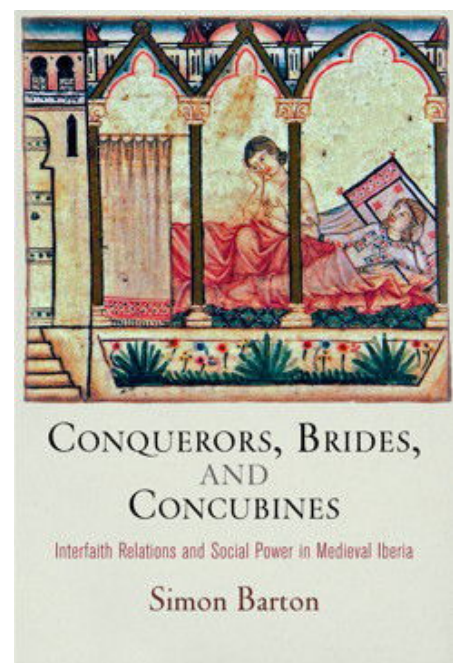
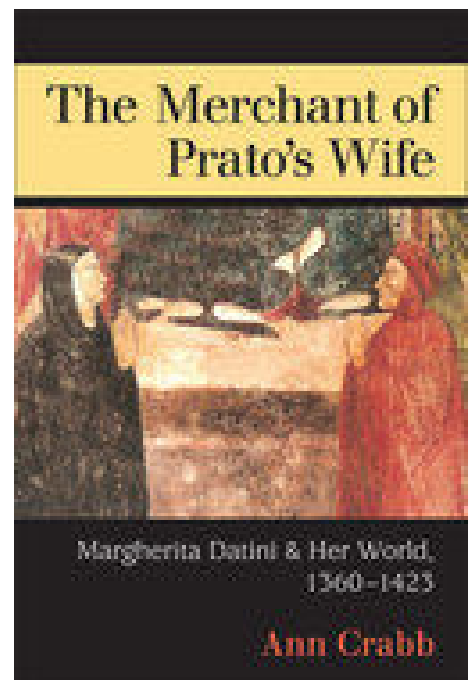
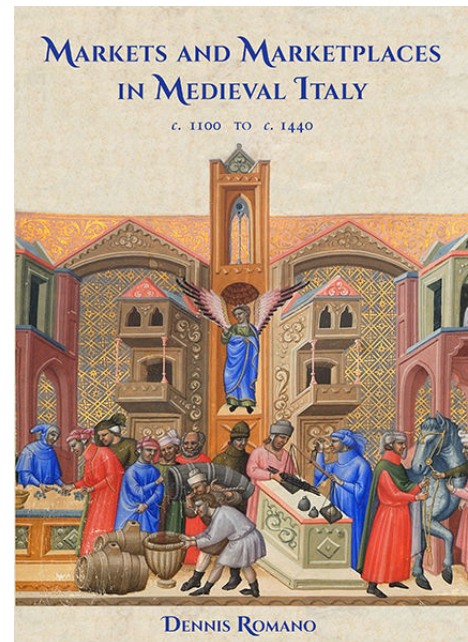
By Ann Crabb
University of Michigan Press

The Merchant of Prato by Iris Orago was published in 1957 and immediately found a large audience for detailing the life and business of Francesco Datini (1335-1410). After years of research, Ann Crabb reveals the story of his wife, Margherita Datini. Drawing on the hundreds of letters that Francesco and Margherita wrote to each other, this book will be essential to anyone interested in the social life and business world of merchants from medieval Italy.

Conquerors, brides, and concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia

By Simon Barton
University of Pennsylvania Press

From the publisher: "Interfaith liaisons carried powerful resonances, as such unions could function as a tool of diplomacy, the catalyst for conversion, or potent psychological propaganda. Examining a wide range of source material including legal documents, historical narratives, polemical and hagiographic works, poetry, music, and visual art, Simon Barton presents a nuanced reading of the ways interfaith couplings were perceived, tolerated, or feared, depending upon the precise political and social contexts in which they occurred."

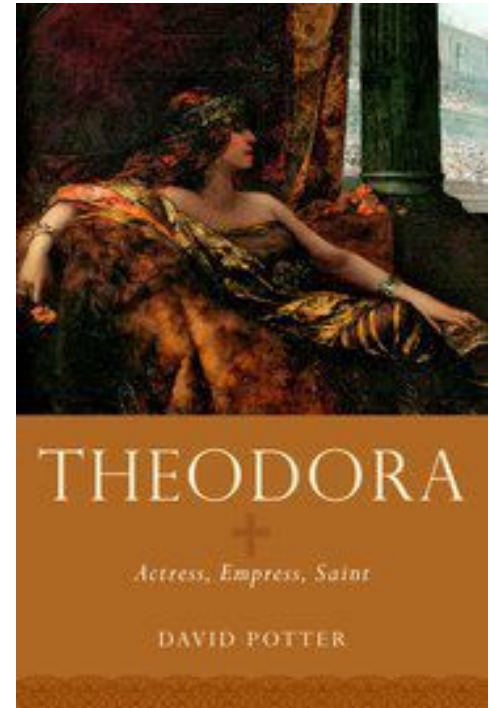


Biographies

Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint

By David Stone Potter
Oxford University Press

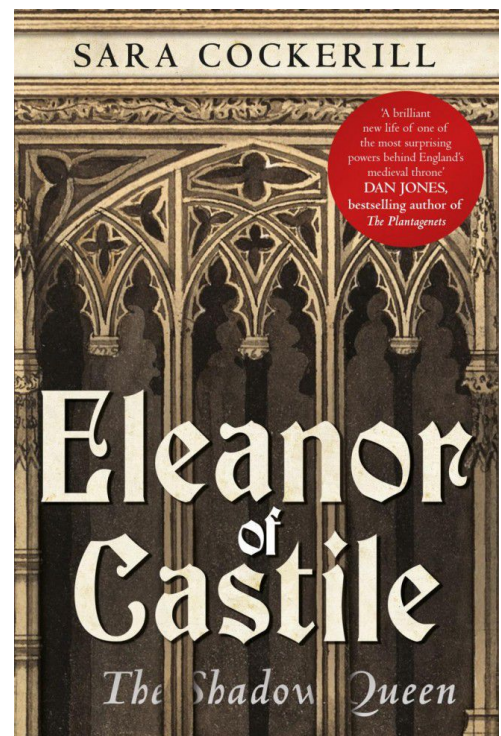
From the publisher: "Theodora's is a tale of a woman of exceptional talent who overcame immense obstacles to achieve incredible power, which she exercised without ever forgetting where she had come from. In *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint*, David Potter penetrates the highly biased accounts of her found in the writings of her contemporaries and takes advantage of the latest research on early Byzantium to craft a modern, well-rounded, and engaging narrative of Theodora's life. This fascinating portrait will intrigue all readers with an interest in ancient and women's history."



Eleanor of Castile: The Shadow Queen

By Sara Cockerill
Amberley Books

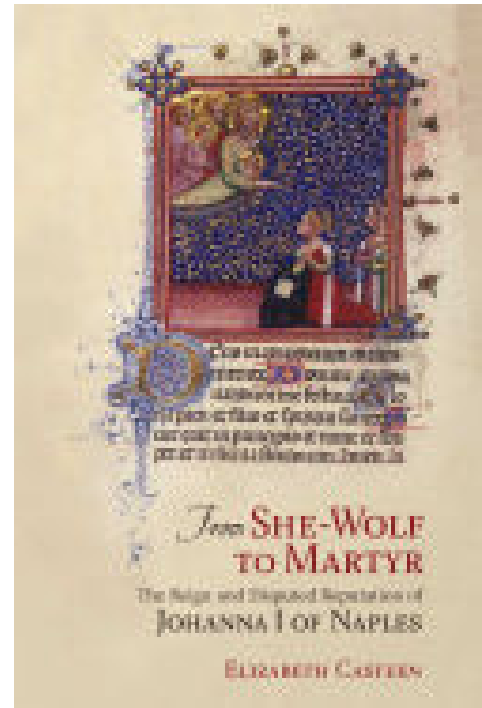
"I would like them to learn that Edward I had a partner who was fully worthy of his greatness, and fully worthy of the unprecedented tribute which he paid to her on her death. But particularly I would like them to get a sense of a truly remarkable, vibrant woman with huge abilities and passionate interests. A woman who would be enormous fun to be with, who would have great conversation – and who you would do best not to cross. And a woman who was content to let her talents be subsumed into her husband's kingship and has consequently lacked the recognition she deserves. I have developed a huge admiration and affection for her – I would like to hope that others will, too. I have also been rather inspired by her, in particular by the way she honoured and committed to the things which were important to her, even when you might think that she had more than enough going on!" - Sara Cockerill, in an interview with Nerdalicious.com



From She-Wolf to Martyr: The Reign and Disputed Reputation of Johanna I of Naples

By Elizabeth Casteen
Cornell University Press

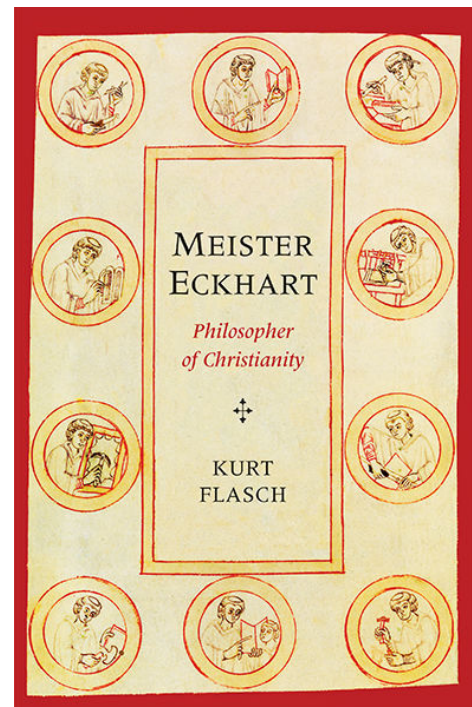
In 1343 a seventeen-year-old girl named Johanna (1326–1382) ascended the Neapolitan throne, becoming the ruling monarch of one of medieval Europe's most important polities. For nearly forty years, she held her throne and the avid attention of her contemporaries. Their varied responses to her reign created a reputation that made Johanna the most notorious woman in Europe during her lifetime.



Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity

By Kurt Flasch
Yale University Press

"Flasch is one of the senior scholars and best known writers on late German medieval thought in Europe. This convincing book should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding the background and sources of Eckhart's ideas."- Clyde Lee Miller, Stony Brook University



The Best of the Rest

Medievalism : A Critical History

By David Matthews
D.S. Brewer

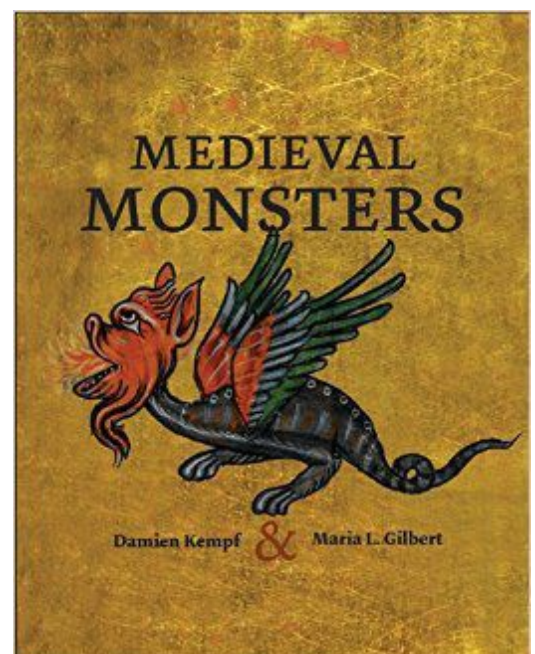
From the Publisher's Description: "The field known as "medievalism studies" concerns the life of the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages. Originating some thirty years ago, it examines reinventions and reworkings of the medieval from the Reformation to postmodernity, from Bale and Leland to HBO's Game of Thrones. But what exactly is it? An offshoot of medieval studies? A version of reception studies? Or a new form of cultural studies? Can such a diverse field claim coherence? Should it be housed in departments of English, or History, or should it always be interdisciplinary? ... *Medievalism: a Critical History* scrutinises several key categories - space, time, and selfhood - and traces the impact of medievalism on each. It will be the essential guide to a complex and still evolving field of inquiry.



Medieval monsters

By Damien Kempf
British Library

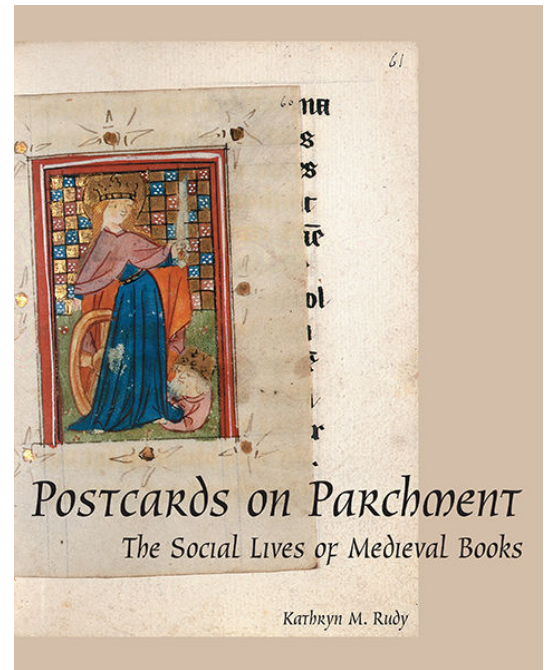
The 100+ images in this book make it a beautiful work for a medievalist. Kempf adds in all the details to tell us about dragons, griffins, cyclops, blemmyae and all the other scary creatures that could be found in the medieval imagination.



Postcards on Parchment: The Social Lives of Medieval Books

By Kathryn M. Rudy
Yale University Press

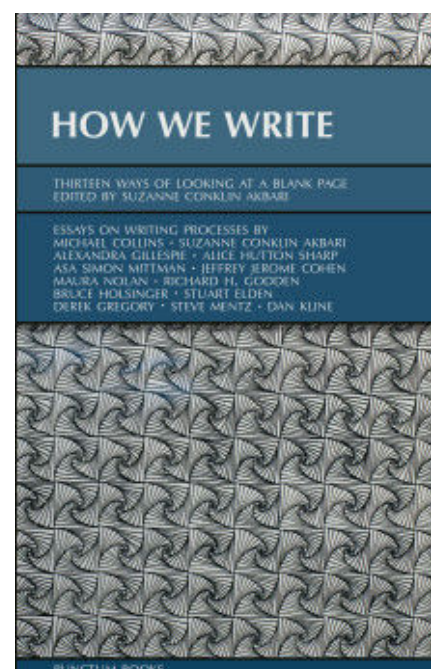
From the Publisher's Description: "Medieval prayer books held not only the devotions and meditations of Christianity, but also housed, slipped between pages, sundry notes, reminders, and ephemera, such as pilgrims' badges, sworn oaths, and small painted images. Many of these last items have been classified as manuscript illumination, but Kathryn M. Rudy argues that these pictures should be called, instead, parchment paintings, similar to postcards. In a delightful study identifying this group of images for the first time, Rudy delineates how these objects functioned apart from the books in which they were kept. Whereas manuscript illuminations were designed to provide a visual narrative to accompany a book's text, parchment paintings offered a kind of autonomous currency for exchange between individuals—people who longed for saturated color in a gray world of wood, stone, and earth. These small, colorful pictures offered a brilliant reprieve, and Rudy shows how these intriguing and previously unfamiliar images were traded and cherished, shedding light into the everyday life and relationships of those in the medieval Low Countries."



How We Write: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blank Page

Edited by Suzanne Conklin Akbari
Punctum Books

This is perhaps the most unusual book on the list - it is not about medieval history, rather about how medievalists should write. Thirteen scholars offer their thoughts about the writing process, and it will be interesting to see how their ideas might change scholarly works in the coming generation. You can download this book for free at Punctum Books



Gratian's Dilemma: The Man, the Prostitute, the Maid and the Infidel

The *Decretum Gratiani* is the most important work written about Canon Law in the Middle Ages. Written in two versions by Gratian, a scholar and Bishop of Chiusi who died in 1144 or 1145, the Decretum was a widely influential work that examined the laws of the Catholic church.

One of the most interesting sections in the Decretum is where Gratian offers 36 imaginary scenarios, and asks his readers various questions based on them. As scholars believe his work was meant to be a textbook for the classes Gratian taught at the University of Bologna, these scenarios can be seen as vivid examples that could perk up the interest of even the most bored student.

For example, Gratian offers us this case:

Since he did not have a wife, a man joined a prostitute to himself in marriage. She was infertile and the daughter of a serf and the granddaughter of a freeman. Although the father wanted to give her to another, the grandfather joined her to this man, for the reason of incontinence only. Thereafter, the man, led by regret, began to attempt to conceive children with his own maid. Afterwards, when he had been convicted of adultery and punished, he asked a man to take his wife by violence, so that he would be able to divorce her. When this had been done, he married an infidel woman, but on the condition that she converted to the Christian religion.

questions:

Now it is first asked if it is licit to take a prostitute as a wife? Second, if she who is taken [as a wife] for the reason of incontinence is to be called "wife"? Third, whose judgement would she follow, the free grandfather or the servile father? Fourth, if he is allowed to conceive children with a maid while his wife is alive? Fifth, if she who suffers violence is proven to have lost her virtue? Sixth, if an adulterous man can divorce his adulterous wife? Seventh, if a man may marry another while his divorced wife is alive? Eighth, if a Christian man may take in marriage an infidel under the aforementioned condition?

No answers are given in the text – however, one could imagine that they sparked an interesting debate in the classroom.

This portion was translated as part of Anders Winroth's book *The Making of Gratian's Decretum*. Winroth is working on producing a new edition and translation of the Decretum within the next few years.

Afterwards, the author gives us these eight

The Story of Exodus (The Anglo-Saxon

By Danièle Cybulskie

In Anglo-Saxon England, Christian faith was a fundamental part of daily life and culture, although the Bible itself was inaccessible to many Christians because of barriers in both literacy and in language. In an effort to make Bible stories relatable, memorable, and (most of all) understood, some English clergymen took Old Testament stories and transformed them into beautiful, distinctly Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Like other Anglo-Saxon poems, these biblical narratives took the form of alliterative poetry, with two stresses on either side of a *cæsura* (pause). (I explained these features of Anglo-Saxon poetry a bit more in **another post**, for those who are interested.) They also gave the audiences what they wanted in terms of narrative preference, without sacrificing the all-important content.

Daniel Anlezark's compilation *Old Testament Narratives* contains one of my favourite examples of this type of Bible-story-turned-Anglo-Saxon-epic in the anonymous poetic version of the book of Exodus: the account of Moses, Pharaoh, and the Red Sea. In the **Latin Vulgate Bible**, Pharaoh and his army are basically wiped out in only a couple of lines:

*reversa eque sunt aquae et operuerunt currus
et equites cuncti exercitus Pharaonis qui
sequentes ingressi fuerant mare ne unus*

quidem superfuit ex eis

*And the waters returned, and covered the
chariots and the horsemen of all the army of
Pharaoh, who had come into the sea after them,
neither did there so much as one of them
remain. (Exodus, 14:28)*

In the Anglo-Saxon version, however, this is covered in more than fifty gorgeous lines of poetry. Here is a sample of just sixteen lines (Anlezark's translation):

*The streams stood, the storm went up high to
the heavens, greatest of martial laments. The
hateful ones screamed in fated voices – the sky
above darkened – blood suffused the flood. The
shield ramparts were riven, the greatest of sea-
deaths scourged the sky, bold ones perished,
kings in their splendor; the option grew weaker
before the sea's vanguard – the shields shone
high over the warriors, the seawall ascended,*

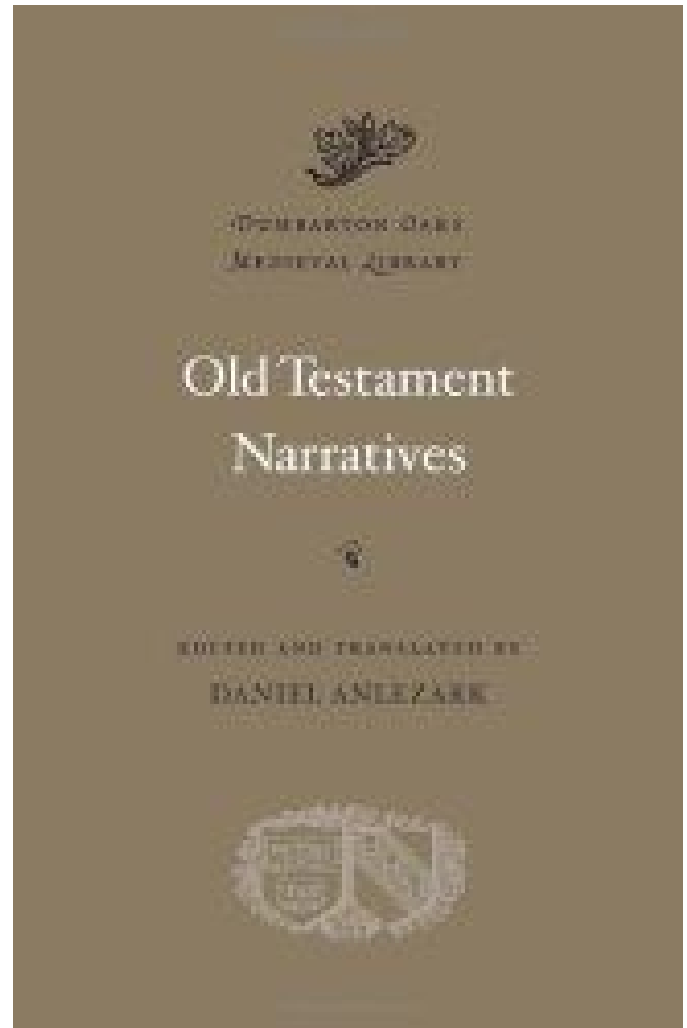
seawall ascended, the brave sea-current. The force was firmly fettered in slaughter, the weak flow of the advance was hindered by armor. Sand awaited the doomed army, when the river of waves, the ever-cold sea, with salt surges came back from its diverted course to seek out its accustomed eternal foundations, the naked messenger of distress, the hostile wandering spirit who overtook the enemies. (ll.460-476)

This little sample from Exodus has lost none of the sense of the original words, but has expanded to give more weight to those things that are common subjects of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry: the ruthless beauty of the sea; warriors in arms; blood and slaughter. It always reminds me of Beowulf's battles with sea creatures, most notably Grendel's mother, in its evocative images of sea foaming with blood.

While this much-expanded account perhaps contains more drama than the Vulgate's drier account (no pun intended), the author never lets his version lose focus: this victory was only made possible, he stresses, by God's intervention, not by human action. In true Anglo-Saxon form, he calls this "the handiwork of God – the foamy-bosomed one, the guardian of the flood" (ll.493-494). While the author uses the devices of epic poetry, he firmly places God as the hero, not man.

The clever authors of these Anglo-Saxon biblical poems knew their audiences, engaging readers and listeners by retelling Old Testament stories in an epic way that was both familiar and beloved. The result was a beautiful new way of looking at old stories for both Anglo-Saxons, and for the people who have come after them.

For more of this beautiful translation of Exodus, check out the rest of Anlezark's ***Old Testament Narratives***.



You can follow Danièle
Cybulskie on Twitter
@5MinMedievalist

Offa, King of Mercia

By Susan Abernethy

The eighth century Anglo-Saxon king Offa of Mercia must have been an impressive and powerful king to his contemporaries. Offa could make the claim of being the first “king of the English”. While he consolidated quite a bit of the kingdom, he did have some trouble holding on to all the parts of it. But his true ambition was power and power alone, not necessarily the unification of England.

Offa was named for an earlier Offa, king of Angeln, one of the fabled ancestors of the Mercian royal dynasty. He was the son of Thingfrith and claimed to be a descendant of Eowa, a mid-seventh century Mercian king and brother of the celebrated King Penda of Mercia. Offa was a cousin of King Aethelbald of Mercia who reigned from 716 to 757. During Aethelbald’s reign, Mercia was restored as the dominant Anglo-Saxon kingdom in England as it had been under King Penda after a period of unrest. For unknown reasons, Aethelbald was murdered, possibly by his own bodyguard and he was succeeded by Beornred. After a period of civil unrest, Offa dethroned Beornred.

While the records of Offa’s early reign are spare to non-existent, we can gather information from other sources and better records from later in his reign. After winning the throne, Offa began his road to supremacy

with sword, political astuteness and bloodshed. While earlier kings were content to rule without venturing into internal affairs of subsidiary kingdoms, Offa’s method was to demote or even remove local kings and absorb them into his Mercian empire. The first kingdom to feel his wrath was Sussex. Offa conquered the people in the Hastings area in 771 and the local rulers were reduced to dukes or ealdorman, becoming appointees who ruled in Offa’s name.

Next Offa relegated the local rulers of the kingdom of Hwicce to kinglets or sub-kinglets. By 780, there was no evidence of a local dynasty in the area and it was ruled directly by Offa. In 762, Offa took advantage of unrest in Kent after the death of King Aethelbert II and by 764, Offa appears to have set up his own man there. But Kent was not going down easily. We don’t know the exact circumstances leading up to the battle but in



Gloriosus Rex Offa Merciorum tenens
 gubernacula. corpore beati Albani pa-
 troni nostri de terra levato fundavit
 istud monasterium. possessionibusque ac multis liber-
 tatibus ditavit magnifice. ac non multo post Ro-
 mam petiit corporaliter. ut sicut temporalibus et re-
 galibus dignitatibus hoc monasterium ditavit in an-
 glia: ita illud nobilitaret privilegiis impetratis
 a sede apostolica. Et quia repperit dominum papam
 Romanum videlicet primum sibi favorabilem. exultavit spi-

King Offa, In Thomas Walsingham, *Catalogue Of the Benefactors Of St. Albans Abbey* (14th century)

776 the Mercians met the men of Kent at Otford, near Sevenoaks. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle doesn't tell us exactly who won the showdown. Despite his superior forces, the most likely outcome was a Mercian defeat as Kent retained its independence for a number of years. Offa kept up the pressure and the last known charter issued by a local Kentish ruler was in 784. Offa may never have established complete hegemony over Kent but perhaps Mercia retained some nominal control there until it was conquered by Egbert of Wessex in the ninth century.

In the mid-750's London and the Thames came under the control of Mercia. Offa was on good terms with the kings of Essex and he may have relied on them to administer the major port of London. This was important for his reign because Offa took an interest in foreign trade and a connection was formed with the overseas trade route out of London along the Thames and also with Canterbury. This made it easier for him to establish relations with the Frankish court of King Charlemagne.

Offa was now forced to fight against King Cynewulf of Wessex. Cynewulf was defeated at the battle of Bensington in 779 and he recognized Offa as sovereign. But he never submitted to Mercian overlordship. Offa managed to regain a lot of lost and disputed territory in the upper Thames valley but it wasn't until the death of Cynewulf and the accession of Beorhtric that Offa could claim Wessex was subservient to him. He married his daughter Eadburh to Beorhtric and she ruled Wessex in her father's name.

In 778 and again in 784, Offa set his sights on Wales where he made many raids. He eventually established a border with Wales by building what is now known as Offa's Dyke. The Dyke runs one hundred fifty miles (or sixty-four miles depending on who you read) from the estuary of the River Dee in the north to Tidenham on the River Severn in the south. The exact nature of the earthwork is unknown

and it most likely wasn't manned. It wasn't so much of a defensive work as a border, distinguishing the demarcation of Wales and Mercia and may have been built in the hope of keeping peace.

Offa's Dyke was an engineering feat, taking many years and men to build. The men of Powys and Glywysing were probably forced into labor. The engineer who designed the dyke used natural features to make it harder to cross and it effectively ended "hit and run" raids by the Welsh. It was a clear sign of Offa's power.

Offa's wife was a woman named Cynethryth who may have been descended from Anglo-Saxon royalty or of Frankish origin. Together they had one son, Ecgrith and at least four daughters, two of which were married off to kings to make alliances. As stated, Eadburh married the King of Wessex and Aelfflaed was married to King Aethelred I of Northumbria. It doesn't appear that Offa ever held any hegemony over Northumbria. Another daughter named Aethelburh became an abbess. There was a daughter named Aelfthryth or Alfrida who appears in the record but there is no clear evidence she actually existed. Her story is related in the tale of King Aethelbert of East Anglia.

The record states that in 794, King Aethelbert came to the court of Offa at Sutton Walls in Hereford, apparently to marry Offa's daughter Aelfthryth and maybe form some kind of alliance. For unknown reasons, on the orders of Offa or Cynethryth, Aethelbert was murdered. Perhaps Aethelbert was trying to break free of Offa's rule. He later became a saint, also for unknown reasons. It was highly unusual for one king to kill another unless there was betrayal or treachery. After Aethelbert's death, Offa assumed complete control of East Anglia.

From the 780's onward, Offa may be considered the most powerful Saxon monarch to rule England up to that point in history. He

history. He only preserved his position by bloodshed and exploitation. The Pope allowed Offa to appoint his own archbishop. Hygeberht was named as the first and only archbishop of Lichfield and in 787, Hygeberht crowned Offa's son Ecgfrith his successor as king of the Mercians. This ceremony was unprecedented and indicates Offa considered himself as king of the English. By doing this, Offa was imitating Charlemagne who in 781 had his two sons anointed by the pope in person.

In 789, Charlemagne made an agreement with Offa to marry his son Charles to one of Offa's daughters. Possibly at the suggestion of Cynethryth, Offa made it a condition that his son Ecgfrith should marry one of Charlemagne's daughters. Charlemagne was so offended by this he suspended trade relations with England. It was only after negotiations with clergy that trade contacts were resumed and neither marriage was ever completed.

Offa adopted the idea of a silver penny from a former Kentish king or possibly Frankish models and made the penny the basic coin of his realm. He established a mint in London. In a most unusual move, he was one of the first medieval kings in the west to put the face of his wife on a coin. Both Offa and Cynethryth were patrons and builders of

monasteries, most notably Winchcombe, St. Albans and Bedford. King Alfred the Great, in the ninth century mentions that he based his codified laws on those of Offa but Offa's codes no longer exist.

King Offa died on July 26, 796, most likely in his sixties and he was buried at Bedford. While he was one of the most powerful and significant of the Anglo-Saxon rulers, he wasn't regarded as an equal of those on the continent. He did attempt to be wise and practical but he was vindictive, ruthless, vain and ambitious. The building of the Dyke was the single biggest man-made legacy from the Anglo-Saxon period of history and Offa's greatest monument.

He did his utmost to groom his son for kingship and pave the way for him to succeed him and possibly rule over all of England. His plans never came to fruition as Ecgfrith died within a few months of his father, leaving no heir. The kingdom of Mercia passed on to distant cousins who never achieved the authority of Offa. In an interesting side note to Offa's story, in the early eleventh century, Aethelstan, the eldest son of Aethelred the Unready bequeathed to his younger brother Edmund Ironside the sword which had belonged to King Offa. Wouldn't it be fabulous to know where that sword is now?

Further reading

British Kings and Queens, by Mike Ashley,

The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England, edited by Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg,

The Saxon and Norman Kings, by Christopher Brooke

The Kings and Queens of Anglo-Saxon England, by Timothy Venning

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography on King Offa, written by S.E. Kelly



Susan Abernethy is the writer of **The Freelance History Writer** and a contributor to **Saints, Sisters, and Sluts**. You can follow both sites on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/thefreelancehistorywriter>) and (<http://www.facebook.com/saintssistersandsluts>), as well on **Medieval History Lovers**. You can also follow Susan on Twitter **@SusanAbernethy2**

Star Wars and the Middle Ages

By Peter Konieczny

As someone who was just three years old when the first Star Wars film was released in 1977, I am of the generation that is the most influenced by the imagery and ideas of stormtroopers, X-Wing Fighters, and 'The Force'. Perhaps the movies also subtly influenced my interest in the Middle Ages.



A pretty good meme!

When George Lucas wrote up the screen play that would become *Episode IV: A New Hope*, he would make use of Earth's history to help create his galaxy far, far away. Those influences range from ancient history to modern American politics, but many scholars believe that the medieval period left the largest imprint on the story. The two most significant influences are in how the original trilogy has many similarities to Arthurian legends and how Jedi Knights are modelled on medieval warriors.

Soon after the first *Star Wars* film was released people were seeing the film as an Arthurian tale. In 1979, Marilyn Sherman wrote:

The parallels to the Arthurian cycle are obvious and numerous. For example, Luke gets his knowledge of the Jedi Knights and their noble values from the wise, mystical, an Merlin-like character, Obi-Wan Kenobi. These knights are custodians of peace and justice in this galactical civilization, and they are armed with appropriate weapons. Luke Skywalker's Excalibur is a light saber, not a clumsy storm trooper blaster that kills at random, but a clean clear ray that dispatches its deserving victim with finality.

Many other writers have made comparisons between the films and the medieval stories. The most indepth examination of the topic was by Angela Jane Weisl in her book *The Persistence of Medievalism*. She explains, "while George Lucas likes to claim that *Star Wars* is a myth for modern times, it is striking that among the variety of mythic narratives he suggests, his strongest inspiration is clearly the medieval Arthurian romance."

One of the first similarities is between the story of Luke Skywalker and King Arthur. Both grow up without knowing who their true parents are, but soon come to meet their mentor – Arthur has Merlin, while Luke gets two: first Obi-Wan Kenobi, and then Yoda. They each get to claim a powerful sword,

Excalibur and a lightsaber, and begin their quest against the forces of evil.

An important plotline in the original *Star Wars* trilogy is the love-triangle between Luke, Leia and Han Solo, which is reminiscent of how Arthur marries Guinevere, who then falls in love with Lancelot. However, Weisl notes that big difference between the Arthurian Romance and *Star Wars* is that the latter gives you a much happier ending. Once we learn that Luke and Leia are siblings, it clears the way for Han and Leia to become the romantic couple. Meanwhile, Guinevere and Lancelot's affair leads to tragedy and is partly the cause of the fall of Camelot.

Moreover, Luke himself does not completely follow in Arthur's footsteps. In the medieval version, Arthur becomes king, but his reign ends when he has to fight his illegitimate son Mordred. At the Battle of Camlann the son is killed and Arthur fatally wounded – in the end both are destroyed, although the medieval writers leave room for Arthur to return – maybe they had a sequel in mind too ;) However, in *Return of the Jedi*, the final clash between Darth Vader and his son end with two saving each other and destroying the evil Emperor. Vader dies, but the story ends on a much more positive note than the typical Arthurian tale.

Another part of the *Star Wars* saga that has a strong connection with the Middle Ages is the creation of Jedi Knights. In his article 'Elegant Weapons for Civilized Ages: The Jedi and Warrior-Monks throughout History,' Terrance MacMullan finds that three warrior groups influenced the way the Jedi were conceived in the films. The first are the Shaolin Monks, who were established in China around the 5th century AD. The concept of the Force, a kind of invisible living energy that can be found in all things, is very similar to the Shaolin's concept of Qi. Shaolin masters believed that through study and training one could make use of Qi to improve their senses and abilities, even to heal or use in warfare.

in warfare. Like the Force, which has its Light and Dark sides, the Yin and Yang of Qi are opposite forces that can be used for constructive or destructive ends.

The second group of warriors are the Samurai of Japan. While the armour of the Samurai (in particular their helmets) were the inspiration for look of Darth Vader, the philosophy of these warriors also has much in common with the Jedi. Like the Shaolin, the Samurai were followers of the Zen Buddhism religion, which according to MacMullan "teaches that in order to truly understand all things, one must let go of the conscious mind that divides the world according to categories and must cultivate mushin or 'no mind'." In *A New Hope* Kenobi teaches Luke to "let go your conscious self and act on instinct", a lesson Luke is able to use when he makes the "one-in-a-million shot" that destroys the Death Star.

The third and perhaps most influential group of warriors were the Knights Templar – in early scripts the Jedi Knights were actually called Jedi Templar. MacMullan writes the Templars "were esteemed above other knights for their austerity, devotion, and moral purity. Like the Jedi, they practiced individual poverty within a military-

monastic order that commanded great material resources. Both knightly orders demanded celibacy and obedience from their members, who in turn were revered as paragons of honesty, wisdom and bravery."

While the Jedi were guardians of peace for the galaxy, the Templars had a similar (if a little less ambitious) goal: they were formed in the early twelfth-century to protect the recently conquered Holy Land and its Christian pilgrims from Muslim armies and brigands. Over the next two centuries they became an increasingly important part of the Christendom, not only serving as the elite military for the Kingdom of Jerusalem, but also establishing monastic centres throughout Europe.

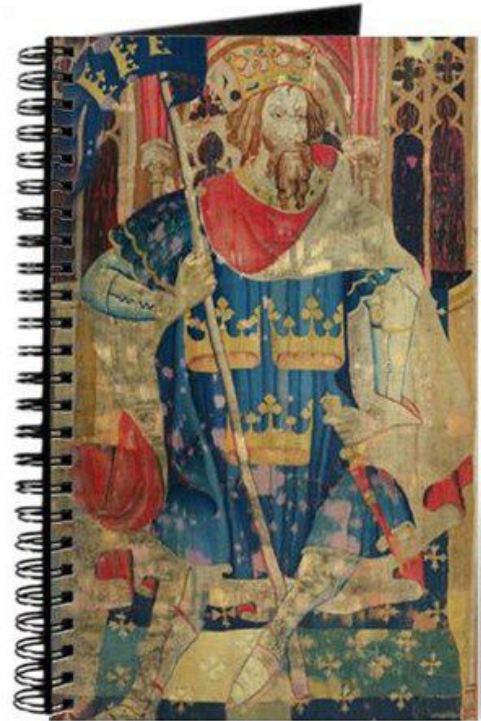
The power and wealth of the Templars would make them a target, and ultimately would lead to their fall. Under allegations of heretical practices, the Templars were arrested and put on trial. Many of their leaders would be executed and the order was disbanded. This fate would be echoed in the film *Revenge of the Sith*, when the Emperor unleashes his evil plan to destroy the Jedi. While the Jedi are able to return and defeat the Emperor, in history the Templars made no such comeback.



**Alec Guinness as
Ben Kenobi in *Star
Wars Episode IV: A
New Hope***

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