CFP: Medieval Joy Undergraduate Conference at Seattle University

Application deadline: February 7, 2025
Event Dates: April 5-6, 2025

The Medievalist Toolkit invites applications for undergraduate presenters to a conference to be held at Seattle University on April 5th, 2025. This event is paired with a public roundtable discussion at the National Nordic Museum in Seattle on April 6th, where non-academics inspired by medieval themes will discuss how they draw joy from the premodern world to create inclusive spaces in the present and future. The panelists from that event will serve as expert consultants for the conference, offering guidance for students on communicating the importance of medievalist research to a public audience.

Participating students will give a short presentation of their original research on any topic that explores the overlap between the medieval and the modern, including but not limited to:

- Uses of medieval symbols or references in modern political discourse
- Medieval examples that seem modern or "ahead of their time"
- The importance of medieval precedent for modern times
- Imaginations of the Middle Ages in modern literature, art, and media
- The meanings of "medieval" and associated vocabularies in current usage

We define "medieval" as the period between 300 and 1600, globally. We define "modern" as the period since the start of the 19th century, and "current" or "contemporary" as the period from the end of WWII to the present.

Eligibility:
Any student currently enrolled in a degree-granting, accredited undergraduate program is eligible to participate. Any research the student has done may be the basis of their presentation, whether individually or as part of a group project, within or outside of a class, and resulting in a formal paper or not. Research may also be ongoing. Students who worked together may jointly apply, see application form for instructions. Supervising instructors can hold any appointment at the institution where the student's work was done. Supervising instructors do not need to attend the conference with their student.

Help for educators:
We hope that this will offer an opportunity for college educators to integrate assignments, big or small, into their existing courses that address the use of the medieval in the modern. These can be in-class activities, weekend projects, or term papers. We are happy to consult with educators to help them tailor an assignment to their classes, and we also offer the attached assignments that educators are welcome to use and modify to suit their needs. The outcomes of any of these assignments would be appropriate for this conference.

1) **What is Medieval(ism)?** This is designed as an in-class activity to probe what seems medieval about popular video media. It works best with small groups, but can also be adapted as a longer project for groups or individuals.
2) **Glossary Entry**. The building block of the Medievalist Toolkit's work, we have found as educators that glossary entries are a useful tool for students as well. These can be done in about a week, or they can be a step in a longer assignment. Students pursue the use of a medieval concept in current public discourse and research its medieval usage, ultimately recommending a current definition for the term that takes both uses into account. See examples at medievalisttoolkit.org.
3) **Article**. This short essay is another type of writing the Toolkit uses in our work that transfers well to the classroom. Best as a term paper, students explore the use of a medieval concept in the present, digging into its more complex history as both a historical artifact and a modern symbol. Topics can be conceptual, such as the meaning of the term "medieval" or the idea of "medieval violence", or they can be grounded in specific historical references such as knights, clothing such as the hennin, or visuals such as Nordic runes. Examples can also be found at medievalisttoolkit.org.

Submission:

Instructors and students should submit their proposal jointly. Proposals should include:

- A completed application form (see below).
- The assignment that the student's work fulfilled - This can be a brief summary of the assignment and its parameters, or the original assignment description itself.
- A copy of the student's work, or otherwise an abstract or brief summary (~150 words) if the assignment has not yet been completed or was an oral presentation.

Travel bursaries:

We are thrilled to be able to offer 10 travel bursaries for participating students traveling 100 miles or more to present. Awards will average $250 and will be granted according to need and supply. Please follow the instructions on the application form for applying for a travel bursary.

About the Medievalist Toolkit:

The Medievalist Toolkit is a public history project that aims to de-politicise uses of the medieval past and its legacy by providing public-oriented tools that encourage evidence-based discourse. Our main activity lies in building bridges between existing academic outreach, addressing misuses of the medieval past, and teachers, students (K-12 and undergraduate), journalists, and social workers who are engaging with history.

To learn more, visit http://medievalisttoolkit.org.

Questions? Contact medievalisttoolkit@gmail.com or Dr. Robin Reich at rreich@seattleu.edu

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What is medieval(ism)?

Most people learn about the Middle Ages primarily through popular media. They experience a feedback loop of historical dramas set in the Middle Ages, fantasy and other genre fiction meant to evoke aspects of medieval dress and culture, and historical content set in other periods that reference the Middle Ages as a foil or comparison. Even though none of these types of media are historical documents, the increasing verisimilitude or effort to make stories "feel real" embed in our subconscious that these images, sounds, and ways of speaking are medieval or broadly premodern.

This exercise is a challenge to that subconscious. Presented with a selection of theatrical trailers, clips, and still images from popular media adaptations of different medieval-ish stories, we must determine whether these are "medieval" and what makes them so. The aim here is not to criticize the factual accuracy of any piece of media, but to actively evaluate how we think about the medieval and why.

Examples:

- A Knights Tale (2001)
- The Woman King (2022)
- Red Cliff (2008)
- Throne of Blood (1957)
- Game of Thrones (2011-2019)
- Beowulf (2007)
- Outlander (2014-2024)
- Star Wars (1977)
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975)
- Hildegard von Blingin (2021-present)
- Vinland Saga (2019)

Questions to consider:

1. What is the setting of this story? Is it given a real-world historical date? Does it contain a timeline or background narrative that maps onto real-world historical events?
2. Is the worldbuilding of this story internally consistent? Do all the characters dress as if they are in the same time period (e.g. do they have similar silhouettes, similar types of fabrics, similar types of shoes)? Are there comparable degrees of technology between different groups?
3. Are there any features of the society depicted that seem jarring to a modern audience? E.g. slavery, torture, sexual assault, strict gender roles, strictly hierarchical society?
4. How "real" are any mythological or mystical aspects of the story? To what degree to characters express disbelief?
5. What role does religion play in the society/ies depicted?

6. How big is the world depicted? How far do people travel or communicate, and how much do they know about distant places?

Research activity:

Once you have discussed your example, pick an aspect that stands out to you as either typically medieval or anachronistically modern. Now explore whether your impression of this example is true. Use library search resources to find scholarship and primary sources that help you find your answer. Is this based in medieval culture? Was the idea updated or adapted for a modern audience, or placed in a different context? Or is this a fully modern invention? Present your findings to the class.

Glossary Entry Template

Term/Title
(preferably one to two words that are relatively specific: e.g. "iron cross" not "cross")

_____

Explanation
(2-3 sentences summarizing what the term means, when/for what purpose it was originally used, and how it is used now)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Images
(if relevant)

Examples
(no more than 5 quote excerpts of this term used in context, whether by alt-right agitators or by journalists. Properly cite quotes in Chicago Style, including followable links and dates accessed.)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Preferred Use
(a statement indicating how we recommend using/referring to this term. E.g. "Saracen – a derogatory term for Muslims and those of Arab or Middle Eastern descent used throughout the Middle Ages -" or "Deus vult – a term used as a rallying cry during the Crusades that has been coopted as a racist dog-whistle by the alt-right".)

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References/Further Reading
(list any other links, key primary sources, or scholarly or popular writings on this topic, including Medievalist Toolkit articles)

Article Guide

Articles for the Medievalist Toolkit are short essays that put forward arguments about the usage or understanding of historical concepts in the present. In keeping with MT's general style, articles must still utilize neutral language, even as they make argumentative claims, as their purpose is to present a persuasive narrative, not to aggravate.

Articles should be approximately 500-1500 words. They are written in a semi-formal style – approximately the same level of formality as a magazine article, meaning they can use a conversational tone and should stay away from academic jargon. Articles do not use citations, but must still be appropriately factual. Instead, they include a list of further readings at the end. The author need not be an expert in the subject of the article, but should be well-informed about the historiographical context of the topic.

Articles may use a quote or relevant example from a hate group as a focal point in order to show the relevance of the point they are arguing, but this is not a requirement. In addressing said quote or example, the article should refrain from snark or attacks against the speaker – the purpose of the example is to articulate the claim against which the article is arguing, not to prop up a straw man. However, when using an example, the article should move past this point early on, so that the argument can stand on its own and not simply as a reaction to someone else's statement.

The topic of an article should concern a historical concept, theme, or collection of events. As opposed to a glossary entry, which is meant to explain a single specific term, an article should ideally address a concept that encompasses a number of specific terms. For instance, an article can appropriately address the Crusades, but not a specific battle. The purpose of the article is to make an argument about how this concept is understood and used in the present. It should not, therefore, primarily inform the reader of factual information, but should instead put forward a narrative or historiographical argument that explains facts as necessary. Articles serve to guide readers through complex and controversial topics, acknowledging points of disagreement among scholars as well as aspects of the topic that are unknown. Again taking our example of the Crusades, the article should not narrate the events of each crusade in sequence, but should instead highlight debates such as the role of religion. Ultimately, articles should answer the question "what is wrong with the popular understanding of the past, what is the consequence of that misunderstanding, and what is the benefit of correcting it?" The stakes of this argument cannot simply be factual accuracy, especially because it is so difficult to know for certain what happened in the past. The argument should be specific – e.g. "an understanding of the Crusades as a conflict between the Christian West and Muslim East has obscured the complexity of medieval geopolitics and helped contribute to a modern imperialist campaign".