Editors' Introduction

'The world is my home when I'm mobile': Medieval Mobilities

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The idea for a special issue on the transcultural Middle Ages with a focus on mobility came from a mystery novel. The events of Maureen Duffy's *Orpheus Trail* are set in motion by the discovery in an Anglo-Saxon burial of several objects of Middle Eastern origin, including talismans representing Mithric and Orphic cults. While the police sort out a series of grisly murders involving a pedophile ring exploiting migrant boys (another contemporary example of transcultural movement across borders), archaeologists and museum curators of Middle Eastern Studies, Egyptology, Anglo-Saxon England and, oddly, Victoriana, try to figure out how these antiquities fetched up in Essex. It requires a collaboration among experts from several disciplines to solve the murders by deciphering clues from the ancient past. As the 'trail' in the title suggests, the novel highlights flows across boundaries, both national and disciplinary: a temporal and geographical line that stretches back 'from Essex to the North African deserts and the sphinx's smile' (Duffy, 2009, 123).

Duffy's premise that an Anglo-Saxon grave might contain objects from the Middle East is not fiction. Archaeologists, numismatists and historians who study the remains of medieval material culture are constantly confronted with the reality of how often and how far goods traveled in the Middle Ages. This issue of *postmedieval*, then, asks a deceptively simple question: How did

1 One would be hard pressed to find a word in the English language more mundane than 'thing.' And yet it is also extraordinarily complex. Its etymology in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) goes on for at least a page of very small type. Throughout the Indo-European world, 'thing' can refer to an object, matter, a creature or being – even genitalia; it can also denote a court of law, a lawsuit, a legal principle, an event, an assembly or meeting, a parliament. We use the word here in all these senses as a 'gathering' (Latour, 2004).

'things'¹ circulate globally across borders during the Middle Ages and with what consequences for cultural interaction? The volume assumes the construct of a transcultural Middle Ages and puts that paradigm into dialogue with the emerging field of mobility studies. The *trans* in 'transcultural' certainly captures something about movement: How did coins minted in Samarkand end up in England? Christianity from the Eastern Mediterranean rim in China? A focus on the transcultural Middle Ages is often a focus on ideas, people and goods *once they have arrived*. What happened to them in their new home? To focus on mobilities, however, is to pause *on the road*, not to reconstruct the means by which things arrive, but to examine the route itself. What we want to celebrate as cultural fluidity – something that new approaches to medieval studies allow us to see more and more – is the result of mobility.

For the most part, mobility studies – the critical study of the movement of people, goods and ideas – is dedicated to the contemporary moment, a present of displaced persons and immigrants and city streets and airport lounges. Scholars associated with mobility studies tend to cluster in social anthropology, cultural geography and sociology. While a number of medievalists have begun cruising cultural geography and sociology and explicitly articulating a more global, transcultural and mobile Middle Ages, medievalists have been working in the domain of mobility studies without naming or theorizing it as such before 'mobility studies' was recognized as an interdisciplinary. Mobility studies is in need of historicizing, and the Middle Ages is in need of mobility theories.

Specialists in medieval literature who work with texts and the genealogy of texts have long been interested in what we call, after Paul Zumthor, *mouvance* across manuscripts. Zumthor argues for the 'essential mobility of the medieval text,' emphasizing *oeuvre* not as the literal, originary manuscript, but as 'a complex unity constituted by the collectivity of its material versions' (Zumthor, 1972, 71). Bernard Cerquiglini, in his praise of *variance* ([1989] 1999), and other scholars such as Jerome McGann and Tim Machan all emphasize *mobilité du texte* as socially constituted. Texts are part of a network in which (to read through Latour) authors, scribes, rubricators, illuminators, bookbinders, booksellers, patrons, readers, tanners, sheep, inkmakers, galls and goose feathers participate. Moreover, any study of provenance, sources, influences and analogues is a study of the movement not only of the material manuscript and its parts (how did a French manuscript with an Italian binding and a cover of 'Moroccan' leather end up in a monastery in Scotland?) but also of its contents across genres, languages, time and national borders (how did the lyric move from Arabic poetry to French?). The transmission and transmutation of the Alexander story from classical historical accounts to medieval legend and romance to modern fiction and film is a prime example.

One might point to the founding of the Hakluyt Society in 1846 as a key moment in the history of medieval mobility studies. Henry Yule's edition of

The Book of Marco Polo, published in 1871, is another. While scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who studied pilgrimage, East-West trade and travel literature (Bertold Laufer, Leonard Olschki and many more) did not think of themselves as engaged in mobility studies, nevertheless, just as their scholarship enabled postcolonial studies – often oppositionally – their work, along with scholarship by Steven Runciman, Robert S. Lopez, Mary Blaine Campbell, María Rosa Menocal, and others, provides the foundation for the study of medieval *Weltverkehr* (world traffic).

The scholars in this volume, whatever they may owe to these and other precursors, have very different aims and approaches to mobilities as they explore movements across and between medieval cultures generally understood as distinct and internally homogeneous in order to highlight the hybridity and fluidity produced by cultural interaction through commercial traffic, migration, nomadism, imperialism and diaspora. In this introduction, we consider how the 'mobile sociology' articulated by the British sociologist John Urry and others illuminates the movements of people, artifacts, information, words, goods, money, books, art objects, relics and ideas in the medieval world. Although Urry focuses primarily on contemporary mobilities in *Mobilities*, three brief passages suggest possibilities for a history of mobilities. In his chapter on cars, Urry cites Roland Barthes' comparison of cars and medieval cathedrals in *Mythologies*, describing these seemingly disparate objects as 'the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population, which appropriates them as a purely magical object' (Urry, 2007, 117). Urry does not simply contrast the inertia of the massive and fixed medieval cathedral with the contemporary flows of car culture. Instead, he describes both car and cathedral as hubs for an entire system of movement: the car connects suburbia, the shopping center, strip mall and motel; the cathedral organizes flows of workers and artisans, materials of all kinds, sellers of goods and wares, and pilgrims. Moorings, fixed points that anchor and facilitate movement (think of airports), are not only necessary components of any mobility system; they exist in symbiosis with the mobilities they enable. Urry's second mention of the Middle Ages explores the relationships between movement and economy: 'Historically most societies have been characterized by one major mobility-system that is in an evolving and adaptive relationship with that society's economy' (2007, 51). Here the 'automobile system,' the dominant mobility system of modern life, is an extension of the 'road-system of the Roman Empire, the mediaeval horse-system after the stirrup ... and the cycle-system in twentieth-century China' (Urry, 2007, 51). However, in this issue, William Croke, reading the romance *Der guote Gêrhart*, suggests that mercantilism may have required more than one major mobility-system to attain its global reach, arguing that the poem imagines a world in which merchants who participated in the maritime economies of the late Middle Ages accumulated more than just wealth; their knowledge and expertise provided

them with a powerful, portable cultural capital more efficacious in some situations than aristocratic rank and privilege tied to a specific place. Reputation, virtue or goodness was determined by the mobility of goods: mobility itself served as capital.

Finally, discussing the contributions of the nineteenth-century German sociologist Georg Simmel to a sociology of mobility, Urry offers his most extended discussion of medieval cultures in motion. Simmel, he writes, hypothesized that 'there was more travel by scholars and merchants in the Middle Ages than there was travel at the beginning of the twentieth century' because in the Middle Ages, travel was 'deemed obligatory for many to exchange information, money and objects, a need partly *reduced* in the modern age through the replacement of physical travel by systems that enable the large scale movement of letters, books, money and photographs' (cited in Urry, 2007, 22). This claim makes sense only if we limit our analysis to human mobilities. Urry argues, however, that post offices, banks, libraries and other conveniences of modern life constitute mobility systems in their own right; rather than substituting for the mobility of people, they extend and facilitate human mobility; they might even outrun it. The mobilities of non-human agents are as essential to our project as human movement. Anne Harris in this volume describes how the 'stuff and stone and dust' of Jean Thénaud's travel are assembled between the covers of a book, *Triomphe des Vertus*, 'draw[ing] together assemblages of objects and ideas that both create and are created by the conceptual and material pull of Jerusalem: king, sultan, stone, relic, trade, monster, epistle, exchange, crusade and salvation.' This virtual landscape of the Holy Land bears witness to 'the networks – pilgrimage, commerce, crusade, theology and politics – that moved repeatedly across space and time to create its gravitational field.' Harris, along with Kathleen Coyne Kelly (on the Plague) and Jonathan Hsy (on medieval language networks), turns to object-oriented ontologies to track the often unpredictable effects of non-human mobilities. Urry's consideration of medieval mobilities invites us to consider medieval people, artifacts, information, words, goods, money, books, art objects, relics and ideas in motion, as constantly circulating and being exchanged, and therefore anticipating and giving form to the flux of modernity.

Two border crossings mark work in transcultural mobilities. The first entails a shift in focus within medieval studies from the uniqueness or distinctiveness of the national cultures that have defined medieval studies toward scholarship that elucidates the mobility of cultures and the exchanges among them. Such analyses have the potential to decenter Europe as the locus and progenitor of medieval (and modern) cultures. Second, transcultural mobilities require traffic between disciplines, fields and areas of expertise in the academy. Our contributors bring an array of disciplinary methods to bear on the question of mobility to think more globally about routes that connect rather than borders that separate. Defined as we are by our disciplinary training in particular national cultures, medievalists generally hesitate to consider the mobility of the

objects we study. We hold fast to the institutional categories imposed on us by our degrees, which are determined by period, nation and language (Kinoshita, 2009). While recognizing that the efficiencies gained from specialization are significant, the kinds of disciplinary arrangements that result ensure that cultural knowledge remains within these compartmentalized organizational structures – which are, for the most part, defined by a peculiarly nineteenth-century nationalism – preventing us from being 'in the middle' even when we want to be. This volume presents research that investigates the routes, the 'trails,' through which cultures we think of as distinct and bounded make contact, mingle and are recreated.

Medieval Mobilities joins other transcultural explorations, including David Wallace's (2013) New Literary History project, which 'considers literary activity in transnational sequences of interconnected places'; Sharon Kinoshita and Brian Catlos's (2008) Mediterranean studies, that views the Mediterranean rim as 'a shared environment characterized by tremendous ethnic and religious diversity and by the particular intensity of its cultural, economic, and political exchange'; and the forthcoming 'Global Middle Ages,' a special issue of the Global Circulation Project edited by Geraldine Heng and Lynn Ramey that explores 'network[s] of intercultural circulation.' Akbari (2008) argues for a view of Norman culture as a cultural network connecting Sicily, Italy, France and England by sea routes from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia. Scior (Akbari, 2004, 116) concludes that Arnold of Lübeck, in his *Chronica Slavorum*, conceptualized the Mediterranean as 'both an area of borders and of contacts ... [as] diversity within unity.' Both Akbari and Scior extrapolate from Peregrine Horden (an astonishing name in this context) and Nicholas Purcell's (2000) *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, in which the authors, following Fernand Braudel, argue for the Mediterranean as a unity, as a network of micro-regions dependent on a flow of goods and ideas that links them together as a whole. A new paradigm seems to be emerging that resituates previous scholarship on the postcolonial Middle Ages, focusing less on the process of colonization – on relations of dominance and submission between states imagined as fixed entities – and more on intercultural exchange, even when these exchanges occur between unequal political, cultural or economic partners.

The essays in this volume consider the impact of mobility on both the objects and methods of our research to challenge the ways in which medieval studies has been organized around the nation-state, imagined as a fixed locale with clear borders and relative homogeneity of culture, history, language and tradition. This is not to suggest that there was no such thing as fixed or permanent territories in medieval life: states, kingdoms, city-states, empires. 'In the new mobilities paradigm,' however, 'places themselves are seen as travelling, slow or fast, greater or shorter distances, within networks of human and nonhuman agents' (Sheller and Urry, 2006, 214). Both temporal and spatial mobilities are relevant to understanding what medieval people – and modern scholars after them – constituted as geopolitical entities. Douglas Bolender and

Oscar Alred open the volume by challenging the ‘place-ontology’ that constitutes not only their own discipline of archaeology, but the specialties of all of our contributors. They ask how the mobilities of the Viking past can be unearthed through the examination of fixed archaeological remains. Terms like *mobility* and *immobility* (stasis, fixity, sedentarism), they suggest, can only be understood in relation to one another, as mutually interdependent and unstable. Their argument attempts to rethink the opposition between sedentarism and nomadism, between a processual and essentialist understanding of place. In the end, the distinction between movement and non-movement, mobilities and ‘moorings,’ place and itineracy must be understood as a function of the choices we make in our research that ‘give voice to one set of features while silencing others.’ Places are neither mobile nor immobile in and of themselves, but only in relation to other ‘things’ and other places.

The work of mapping mobilities might enable us to move beyond simply collecting case studies about unrelated or loosely related places, to begin to imagine something like a medieval world system, however complex and messy it might turn out to be. Of course, this volume can only gesture toward a chaotic but patterned medieval world system (or systems, since there is no reason to assume that the Middle Ages are any more homogenous across time than across space). *Medieval Mobilities* builds upon the pioneering work of Janet Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony*, itself a modification of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory, to describe a medieval ‘world system’ marked by ‘economic integration and cultural efflorescence’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 8). Abu-Lughod examines an ‘international trade economy’ as it developed between 1250 and 1350, ‘that stretched all the way from northwestern Europe to China’ involving ‘merchants and producers in an extensive (worldwide) if narrow network of exchanges’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 8). In a Euro-centric paradigm, we tend to describe trade routes as *leading* to the European West from the Far and Middle East (the very words *far* and *middle* reinforce Euro-centrism). However, to think outside of this paradigm allows us to see world trade routes as multi-directional, comprised of significant networks and nodes that do not organize themselves in connection to a given center. Doing so might lead us to rethink Europe’s place within a mobile world system (however loosely imagined). We are heir to a received narrative that asserts Europe’s hegemonic domination of the world as completed by the nineteenth century; however, given that Europe in the early Middle Ages lagged behind the Middle and Far East both economically and culturally, we must question the implied inevitability of such a narrative. Abu-Lughod’s work, then, demonstrates the explanatory power of a global analysis that does not attempt to describe a totalizing world system derived from relationships between fixed and stable ‘places’ but which foregrounds movements and flows.

Since ‘the systematic features of globalization are not well understood,’ we might ask how ‘the complexity sciences may provide concepts and methods that

begin to illuminate the global as a system or series of systems' (Urry, 2003, 7). We might describe a medieval world system founded upon the idea of transcultural mobility, however loosely, through chaos theory, which studies the behavior of dynamic systems – that is, systems in motion, movement, flux, flow. This world system would still be marked by order rather than randomness, but it would not be the kind of linear order described by Wallerstein's world system. A paradigm of a world system on-the-move also differs from analyses of 'globalization' that treat the world as 'too unified and too powerful,' too 'simplified, static and reductionist' (Urry, 2003, 40). Such a world system might best be described as simultaneously patterned and messy. Invoking chaos theory may be more than a simple 'transfer of complexity from the physical world into the social world' (Urry, 2003, 17). Chaos theorists already analyze phenomena from both the physical world – fluid dynamics – as well as the social world – population dynamics – and social scientists are increasingly recognizing the difficulty of studying the social world in isolation from the physical world, often using the term 'hybrid' to describe 'complex muddles of nature and culture' (Latour, 2004). 'Notions of complexity,' Urry (2010, 349) hypothesizes, 'can analyse intensely mobile hybrids that roam across the globe and help to create a self-reproducing global order.' One of these 'intensely mobile hybrids' explored by our contributors is language. While language has long been understood as one of the constitutive elements of the nation-state, essays in this volume by Heather Bamford and Jonathan Hsy explore the volatility of languages 'on the road.' Bamford describes the *muwashshaha*, lyric poems that are complex amalgams of Arabic, Hebrew and early Spanish, not as defective fragments, but as 'ruins in motion,' worth reading on their own and as witnesses to cultural interactions that link Cairo to the Iberian Peninsula. Hsy visits various contact zones in medieval texts in which an Other's language is staged or presented as enacting the possibility of mobility across cultures. His authors 'find distinctive ways to think about the phenomenology and mechanics of mobile language networks, and they adopt inventive strategies for narrating movement across and through different sociolinguistic environments.'

Urry (2010, 353) describes a global system marked by complexity through three tropes: *region*, *network* and *flow*. Medievalists study regions – states, empires, realms – marked by structures that imply 'a centre, a concentration of power, vertical hierarchy and a formal or informal constitution' (Urry, 2003, 9). Daniel Hartnett's essay, 'Have Dante Will Travel,' begins with the premise that this sovereignty may be the most immobile of medieval entities. Alfonso V of Aragon could relocate his court from Aragon to Naples to assume the throne of that city-state, but he could not bring with him the symbolic capital he had accumulated as king of Aragon. His sovereign legitimacy could not travel with him. However, by commissioning a luxury manuscript edition of Dante's *Commedia*, Alfonso explicitly appropriates, links and *shifts* the cultural capital

of Dante's work for speakers of Italian to his person as part of a larger strategy designed to build the symbolic capital necessary to support his lineage.

A network is 'a set of interconnected nodes, the distance between social positions being shorter where such positions constitute nodes *within* a network as opposed to those lying outside that particular network' (Urry, 2003, 9). Such networks transect and connect regions, regardless of boundaries. Examples of medieval networks are various and heterogeneous, including the mercantile networks described by Abu-Lughod (and in this volume by Crooke, Hsy and Kelly) that moved objects and people around the world; the patronage networks described by Hartnett and Harris which linked people across geographical boundaries; supply lines during times of warfare, as well as looting and pillaging, which illustrate the ways in which flows can escape orderly routing; and the network of moorings required to manage pilgrimages to Compostela, Jerusalem, Mecca or other religious sites. Finally, the construct of global flows describes 'the heterogeneous, uneven and unpredictable mobilities of people, information, objects, money, images and risks, that move chaotically across regions in strikingly faster and unpredictable shapes' (Urry, 2010, 356). While global flows move through networks, such flows are not always contained by already-constituted networks in predictable ways. Indeed, flows may create their own, new networks. In 'Flea and ANT: Mapping the Mobility of the Plague,' Kathleen Kelly suggests one such flow – the Plague that swept across the globe from Asia to northern Europe in the fourteenth century in a relatively short time, with cataclysmic and unforeseen effects on the regions through which it passed. In Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, Kelly finds a 'heuristic for thinking about the Plague in a way that decenters human actors, thus opening up a space for retelling the history of the Plague as simultaneously material (things-on-the-move) and semiotic.' Thus the authors of the essays in this volume trope 'flow' and 'fluidity' to investigate the ways in which 'things' like plague and poetry, goods and goodness, books and weapons move through and *around* networked relations of trade routes and crusades, patronage and marriage, reshaping cultures as they go.

Such analyses do not ignore inequalities. Transcultural studies recognizes that not everyone has equal access to mobility and that such inequalities have consequences, and, given the sensitivity to initial conditions that mark complex systems, may have a very large effect on the system (the so-called butterfly effect). The effects, both positive and negative, of mobilities and flows are unequally distributed across and within regions. Mobility for one group might entail immobility for others. Serfs were in theory bound to the land, while the livelihoods of mercenaries (or their fictional counterparts, the knights-errant in the romance) and military religious orders depended on their mobility. While monks and nuns were expected to remain within the walls of the monastery or convent, friars were expected to be itinerant. Even as we witness a flourishing of court culture (which required a stable locus) and the expansion of fixed retail

marketplaces in metropolitan centers in the Middle Ages, laws were created and policing mechanisms devised to protect the ‘network’ that fed these ‘nodes’ – that is, security for the traditional royal progress and safe conduct for merchants. During the Middle Ages mobility and immobility function in symbiosis, each supplying potential for the other; networks and nodes break apart and come together in different combinations, both shaping and being shaped by new social relations.

Through this volume’s exploration of medieval mobilities, we hope to encourage further migrations into conceptual territories mapped by geographical trails, by cultures on the road. The project of describing a medieval world system, however, can only ever be collaborative because no one individual or discipline can have the necessary expertise to describe the whole world. This volume is both prolegomenon and call to explore collaboration as a kind of flow, and scholarship itself as a knowledge transfer between domains. We want to suggest that strategic uses of those flows might counter static understandings of scholarly activity and expertise. We open ourselves up to some of the messiness of the Middle Ages by recognizing how often people, objects and ideas were on the road, in movement, in flux, never completely locatable at a single fixed moment, in a single place or speaking in a single language. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari speak to the orientation produced by being ‘in the middle’: ‘It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you’ll see that everything changes’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 25). This volume is a call for a new kind of collaboration within medieval studies, one content to be ‘in the middle’ and responsive to various kinds of flow and movement, intent on looking for connections rather than propping up boundaries. This is an unsettling place but also an exciting space filled with unpredictability, both pleasurable and dangerous. For our readers who, like the contributors to this special issue, are willing to accept the risks and anxieties of being away from the comfortable space readily recognized as home, we offer the pleasures of the trail, the road, the excitement of movement, fluidity, where, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, ‘everything changes.’

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