Significant geographies of the Middle Ages: Cluster introduction

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When new editors assumed leadership of *postmedieval* in 2021, myself among them—one of our first aims was to open the journal to scholars working on a wider array of language traditions and geographic regions. That aspiration emerged from conversations held around the journal's tenth anniversary, especially a pair of guest-edited anniversary issues (Arvas, McCannon, and Trujillo 2020; Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich 2020), and from the subsequent editorial search and selection of new editorial board members. Inviting more and different premodern cultures into *postmedieval*'s pages reflected pervasive trends in the field, those that had fueled the establishment of new journals like the *Medieval Globe* (founded 2014), *Medieval Worlds* (founded 2015), and the *Journal of Medieval Worlds* (founded 2019). It also responded to the brilliant interlocutors we were learning from, who studied disparate premodern

archives and whose work offered not just new case studies but alternative concepts and theoretical frames for medievalist study more generally.

At the same time, our effort to diversify the journal's subject matter and contributors has carried with it its own ironies (see Jagot, Orlemanski, and Ritchey 2021 and Orlemanski 2023). Nadia Altschul has long argued that 'The Middle Ages is not a global historical time but a local European time span,' and, thus, the 'globalization of "the medieval" is not an example of full coevalness but is making the world conform to a Eurocentric perspective' (2020, 13). The point is made in more banal fashion in the process of scheduling editorial board meetings, to take place on Zoom: members in time zones at a remove from those of the eastern United States and the United Kingdom are often asked to conform, quite literally, to Anglo-American time. The 'global Middle Ages,' as Sierra Lomuto has cautioned, often functions more as 'a diversity initiative in service of rebranding the field,' rather than as a politically or epistemically transformative project. And Nora Berend has wryly noted that 'The medieval global turn… has happened at a time when the historical profession is beginning to question the global. With unerring sense, we tend to get on the bandwagon just as others are getting off it' (2023, 289). Recent critiques of 'world literature,' and of comparative literature in its globalizing guise, have been especially incisive models of 'getting off the bandwagon.'

The present essay cluster emerges from the journal's tense commitment to medieval studies' global turn—namely, our sense of the intellectual and political vitality of cultural heterogeneity, or how exploring differences in time and space can disrupt routinized thought and epistemic hegemonies, and, at the same time, our uneasy awareness of the limits, the oversights, the self-satisfactions, and the will to power that have belonged at different points and in different ways to the *global* and the *medieval*. In 2021, my co-editors and I decided to organize two journal-sponsored roundtables at the remote meeting of the 2022 International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS). One of those was 'Grounds for a Trans-Regional Medieval Studies: Beyond the Global.'[1] The call for papers reads as follows:

> This roundtable invites participants to conceptualize medieval studies across regions and continents—but to do so outside the framework of globality. The 'global' Middle Ages has been critiqued for its eurocentrism, its neoliberalism, and its encyclopedism, even as it has been the spur for exciting collaborations and redefinitions of medieval studies. What other grounds might be the basis for conversations across geographic distance and difference? Speakers

1   The other was 'Prenational Sources in National Collections: Toward a Comparative Critical Medievalism'; see https://icms.confex.com/icms/2022am/meetingapp.cgi/Session/2590.

are invited to offer alternative frameworks for trans-regional collaborations, comparisons, and study.

The session took place on May 11, 2022, with six eloquent speakers.[2] It gave rise to the essay cluster that follows.

Our conversation that day was a dynamic and ultimately optimistic one. It was informed by speakers' expertise in the study of, variously, China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, eastern Europe, Iberia and Latin America, and the Mediterranean world and by their work in philology, textual editing, translation, history, the history of science, literary studies, and the study of medievalism. The occasion itself was buoying: here we were in generative, sparking dialogue, a fact that seemed to make good on the promise of trans-regional approaches, even as speakers registered to varying degrees their concerns about the limits of *global* and *medieval*. Indeed, perspectives on the roundtable were far from uniform. Participants differed over issues like the relative status of 'connected' and 'unconnected' histories, the role of comparison versus histories of contact and exchange, and just how important the modern politics of time should be to the study of the past. Most of the roundtable's case studies fell between the conventional boundaries of the European Middle Ages, from 500 to 1500 CE—through the less defined span of *premodernity* hovered as an alternative periodizing possibility. It remained unclear whether the 'trans-regional premodern' would differ significantly from the 'trans-regional Middle Ages.'

I draw the title of this introduction, 'Significant Geographies of the Middle Ages,' from the work of comparative-literature scholars Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini, who have defined 'significant geographies' as 'the wider conceptual, imaginative and real geographies that texts, authors and language communities inhabit, produce and reach out to' (Laachir et al. 2018, 5). Their collective research rejects 'the current predilection within world literature for universal categories and simple macro-models that aim to cover the whole world like a single map' (2). Instead, they work with '*actual trajectories and specific uses of spatial concepts/images*, and so geographies that are *significant* rather than generic meta-categories such as "world," [or] "global"' (5, emphasis original). The plurality of geographies thus marshalled 'highlight[s] multiplicity, openness and disjuncture, and discourage[s] easy technologies of recognition and complacent distant gazes' (5). Our *postmedieval*-sponsored ICMS roundtable testified to the plural, jostling 'significant geographies' by which study of the medieval past has been organized, especially under the stimulus of global and trans-regional approaches. These geographies, in turn, assume their significance according to disparate temporalities, from fourth-century pilgrimages and thirteenth-century trade routes, from the entanglements and limits that

2 See https://icms.confex.com/icms/2022am/meetingapp.cgi/Session/2963.

shaped human activity before 1500, but also from the legacies of periodization, historicization, extraction, and domination that have sought to order the globe since then. What stands out from both the roundtable and the essay cluster is how varied and vibrant are the articulations of these several significant geographies of the Middle Ages.

Four of the original speakers are represented in this cluster, and their contributions are briefly previewed below. Before that, however, I want to mention the insights of the other two speakers, who ultimately decided not to submit essays but whose ideas helped shape the conversation. Eric Moses Gurevitch, a historian of South Asian science, technology, and medicine, spoke about the importance of decidedly local knowledges in the premodern world. While global history sometimes valorizes records of connectivity and contact, Gurevitch argued that knowledge that is self-consciously emplaced, without pretensions to transcultural or universal significance, also merits scholarly attention. In his published work, Gurevitch has studied the thought and practices of 'places that now appear under the double effacement of the non-modern non-West,' in part because those places provide 'an essential vantage' from which to question singular, usually Eurocentric understandings of major categories like *science* and *useful knowledge* (Gurevitch 2021, 265). As he remarks in a recent book-review essay, with respect to a 'global' history of modern science:

> European gentlemen implicitly remain the arbiters of what counts as science: it is only through interactions with Europeans that people from the rest of the world can be said to participate in science, and it is only the parts of their knowledge that contribute to our thinking today that can be said to be scientific. What are we to make of everything else—all the other knowledge of the natural world that does not fall under this narrow rubric, including knowledge that was not universalizable beyond the localities in which it was produced? Can we tell a history of science that treats the boundaries of knowledge as changing and that includes those ways of knowing dismissed as lowly, non-modern, manual, and non-theoretical? (Gurevitch 2023)

Gurevitch's work consists of the meticulous study of bodies of knowledge that a historiography focused only on connectivity, or only on genealogies of our present, encourages us to forget. It does so with a keen sense of the conceptual transformations that such study can work on the framework of history itself.

A. J. West, a scholar of the Indo-Malaysian archipelago and Old Sudanese texts, spoke on the roundtable about what he terms the 'hemispheric,' rather than 'global,' Middle Ages. His public writings on

the topic pitch the term modestly—as 'a bit more appropriate for my purposes than "Global Middle Ages"'—but also advance powerfully considered claims about definition and periodization (West 2019; also see West 2017). In the framework he puts forward, '"medieval" is not equivalent to a particular kind or "level" of cultural or technological development,' he writes; instead, 'The "Middle Ages" ended with the Columbian Exchange, a process (rather than a *moment*) that began at the very end of the fifteenth century and which is to some extent still ongoing' (West 2019; also see West 2018). West is interested less in the modern circulation of the periodizing term *medieval* than in the nature of Afro-Eurasian interconnectedness before 1492: 'Intra- and intercontinental connections of various kinds increasingly drew Afro-Eurasia together as a single cultural and economic space prior to Columbus's first voyage to the Americas' (West 2021). West's award-winning dissertation presents an edition and study of a fifteenth-century narrative poem in Old Sundanese, the *Bujangga Manik*, a work that testifies to the interconnections and exchanges that linked Southeast Asia in the period.[3] West also argues for a strong methodological distinction between comparative research, which he deems 'anthropological,' and properly historical studies of connectivity (West 2021). The relative importance of comparison and connectivity continues to be debated by historians of the premodern world as they negotiate the global—or perhaps hemispheric—scale (for an overview, see Holmes and Standen 2018).

I have spent some time invoking West's and Gurevitch's ideas here to enable readers to see them as part of the conversation that unfolds in the pages that follow. Happily, the other interlocutors speak for themselves. The cluster is constituted by four essays, all having developed from the ICMS roundtable, together with a response from Sierra Lomuto. First, Xiaofei Tian offers readers four ways of sidestepping the ideological underpinnings of the *global* and the *medieval*: 'Spacetime, connectivity, multipolarity, [and] juxtaposition.' She approaches medieval studies' global turn from her position as a 'scholar of "Middle Period" Chinese literature with training in English and comparative literature,' and she writes with lucidity and optimism about the possibilities for trans-regional medieval scholarship. In a particularly vivid passage of her essay, Tian finds in the travels of the fourth-century Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (c. 340–422) an exemplum of specifically medieval forms of connectivity, characterized by a multiplicity of centers and peripheries and by the importance of religious as much as mercantile motives. The second essay, Sharon Kinoshita's 'Marco Polo in trans-regional perspective,' reflects on the practical difficulties, and possibilities, faced by medievalists trained in the history and culture of western Europe as they seek to broaden their purview. Kinoshita is relatively unbothered by academic labels, though she

3 See https://www. universiteitleiden.nl/en/ news/2022/05/alex-west-awarded-praemium-erasmianum-dissertation-award-2022.

acknowledges her preference for 'worlding' rather than globality: 'The gerund here is important: "worlding" signifies not a body of material given in advance but a *process* of reading and interpretation.' Drawing from her own experience translating and studying Marco Polo's *Devisement du monde* (*Description of the World*, composed in 1298), Kinoshita invites readers into a scholarly practice that begins from incomplete knowledge but advances through collaboration, curiosity, and steady commitment to reaching beyond one's home discipline, to arrive at powerful insights about the trans-regional medieval world.

In the third essay, '*Hic sunt dracones*: Eastern Europe in the study of the Middle Ages,' Jan Volek looks to the peculiar role of eastern Europe in Anglophone medieval studies and the field's global turn. The region, as he shows, is relegated to the status of a kind of included exclusion: though still part of Europe, and thus the Eurocentrism against which the Global Middle Ages is pitched, eastern Europe nonetheless lay outside the Carolingian Empire and is thus external to a historiography that takes its cues from the western Middle Ages. Volek suggests how fuller consideration of eastern Europe could revise traditional explanatory paradigms of, for instance, feudalism or the Crusades. It could also offer new models of medieval European diversity and contribute to revising the idea of Europe itself. Finally, Rebecca De Souza asks, 'Are there limits to globalising the medieval?' Her essay is skeptical about the emancipatory or decolonial potential of a Middle Ages made global. Instead, she argues from the perspective of Iberian and Latin American studies for the irreducibly European character of the medieval—which nonetheless makes room for the global appropriation and contestation of this markedly European period. De Souza looks to José Rabasa's proposal of the 'nonmodern' as a potential way to evade the coloniality of the medieval-modern divide. She also draws a provocative parallel between the globalizing of the Middle Ages and of the English language. Against the apparent virtue of communicative ease, De Souza offers the linguistic and pedagogical practice of 'translanguaging,' or employing multiple languages in dynamic simultaneity, as a model for combining 'multiple operative temporalities' in a globally comparative history. In a thoughtful afterword, Sierra Lomuto, who has previously critiqued aspects of medieval studies' global turn (Lomuto 2020; 2023), nonetheless celebrates how it has tended to foment 'a humility of *not*-knowing in the pursuit to know.' In response to the varied 'significant geographies' that emerge, Lomuto affirms the field's dynamism: 'As a method, instead of a framework, for engaging the past, the global Middle Ages sets us, and that which we study, into constant motion.' As *postmedieval* continues, we hope to keep following and improvising the steps for such trans-regional motion.

About the Author

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