

The Program in Medieval Studies:

Our First Two Decades (2001-2021)



An Informal History

Charles D. Wright

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Although the Program in Medieval Studies (MDVL) at Illinois was not formally established until 2001, medieval studies as a field of research and as a subject of instruction at UIUC dates back to the late nineteenth century. For an historical overview of former faculty medievalists from the beginnings, see Charles D. Wright's *Historical Register of Medievalists at UIUC* (soon to be available online on the program website), which includes biographical and bibliographical data on some 60 scholars who spent at least part of their careers at UIUC.

Creating Medieval Studies

The impetus for the 2000 proposal to establish a Program in Medieval Studies was the great success of an exchange program (1999–2003) between UIUC and the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Medievalists Karen Fresco (French), Anne D. Hedeman (Art History) and Douglas Kibbee (French) had applied on behalf of campus medievalists to be included as a research group in that exchange (as it turned out, we were the only participating group in the humanities). A number of UIUC medievalists from various departments conducted research in France, and several CNRS medievalists spent extended periods in residence at Urbana, attracted not only by our strong and diverse medievalist faculty but also by our great open-stacks library.

Building on the CNRS exchange, Fresco and Hedeman teamed up with Marianne Kalinke (Germanic Languages & Literatures) to draft a formal proposal to create a Medieval Studies Program in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Fine Arts. According to the proposal narrative,

Medieval studies has long been recognized in the academic world as a distinct discipline within the humanities. ... Medieval studies was “interdisciplinary” long before the term became fashionable. Medievalists, as we call ourselves, study the languages, literatures, histories, societies, mentalities and material cultures of Europe and the Near East in the period from the dissolution of the Roman Empire to the “Renaissance,” employing the methods and approaches of the philologist, archaeologist, historian, social scientist, and cultural critic, and exploiting new technologies for both pedagogical and research goals.

The proposal was for a program that would revise and administer the existing LAS interdisciplinary undergraduate major in Medieval Civilization and would also offer a new graduate concentration in medieval studies. The proposal was approved in 2001. The program's first director, prominent senior scholar **Stephen Jaeger**, was hired in a national search conducted by the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures. Jaeger negotiated successfully with LAS for a substantial recurring MDVL programming budget along with graduate student fellowship support. The program has always made that money go a very long way by applying for other sources of funding, by securing co-sponsorships for visiting speakers, conferences and other events, and by supplementing departmental fellowships offered to first-year graduate students.

Growing Medieval Studies

As MDVL's first director (2001–04), Jaeger established the program's relationships with its multiple participating departments and umbrella colleges, formalizing appointments of MDVL faculty and organizing MDVL's undergraduate and graduate curricula by creating MDVL cross-listings of existing relevant courses

in both LAS and FAA. Jaeger inaugurated the tradition of an annual team-taught graduate seminar led by a program faculty member with participation by other MDVL faculty as well as by invited outside specialists. He led the first of these, on “Medieval Learning and the Rise of the University,” and the “Spring Seminar” remains the centerpiece of our graduate curriculum. As if in answer to that seminar theme, Jaeger also brought about MDVL’s participation in our university’s collaboration with the World Universities Network (WUN).

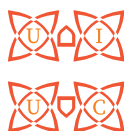
While director, Jaeger also organized two of the program’s first major international conferences. “Emotions and Sensibilities in the Culture and Literature of the Middle Ages” (2002), a collaborative venture with the Free University of Berlin, was at the cutting edge of a major trend in medieval scholarship. The ambitious “The State of Medieval Studies” (2003) assessed recent work and trends in medieval scholarship in history, literature, and art from Britain to Byzantium. Another continuing tradition begun by Jaeger is the practice of having some of our prominent visiting speakers lead small focused seminars as well as giving public lectures.

For all the success of these scholarly conferences, the biggest crowds (of non-specialists and undergraduates, that is) were drawn by outreach events on medievalism in modern film. “The Medieval Sources of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*” (2001), a symposium featuring noted Tolkien scholar and medievalist Tom Shippey, coincided with the release of the first of Peter Jackson’s three film adaptations. It was the first of many such events, including acclaimed dinner-theatre productions of Middle English plays and the ever-popular

Medieval Movie Knights, that have remained an important part of the program’s broader mission to foster interest in and understanding of the Middle Ages and things medieval on campus and in the Champaign-Urbana community.



In his three years as director, Jaeger had given the fledgling MDVL program the big launch it needed. He was succeeded by **Anne D. Hedeman** (Art History). Hedeman’s tenure as director (2004-07) was distinguished by a collaborative spirit and a travel bug that brought UIUC faculty and graduate students together with medievalists from other campuses in North America and Europe. Hedeman and Carol Symes (History) visited a half-dozen WUN universities in the UK to set up future exchanges, especially for graduate students. Our only Spring Seminar on the road was Hedeman’s collaborative offering with Robert Ousterhout (2004), “The Globalization of Medieval Culture: Paris and Constantinople circa 1204.” Seminar students toured historical sites in both Paris and Istanbul and marked a crucial historical moment in the globalization of medieval culture. Hedeman also began a tradition of arranging for small groups of graduate students to have



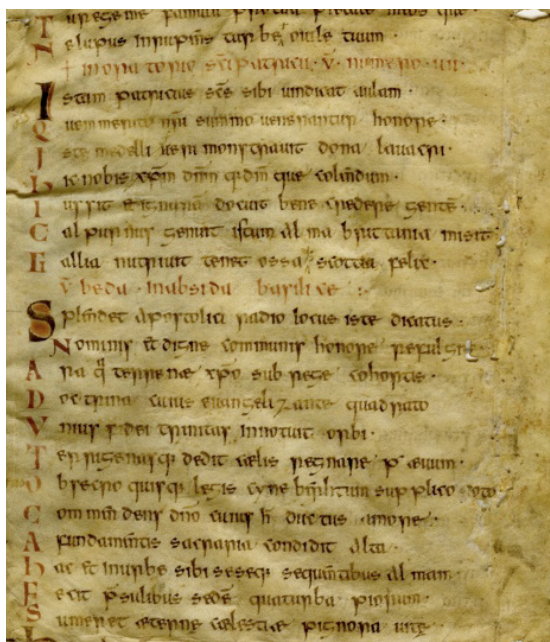
luncheons with our visiting speakers, providing them with opportunities for extended conversations with prominent scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum.

In Spring 2005, Mary Carruthers (New York University), celebrated for her ground-breaking and influential studies of memory in the Middle Ages, spent two weeks on campus as the Mellon Distinguished Visiting Professor, giving public lectures, meeting with graduate students and faculty, and participating in symposia and roundtables. That Fall she returned to Urbana for a Mellon State-of-the-Art conference in her honor, “Making Thoughts, Making Pictures, Making Memories in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.”

Karen Fresco became director in 2008. In organizing, sponsoring, and securing funding for MDVL conferences and symposia, Fresco was tireless. Following on the heels of a 2007 conference she co-organized with Hedeman (“Collections in Context: The Organization of Knowledge and Community in Europe”), Fresco co-organized another one on “Translating the Middle Ages” (with Charles D. Wright, 2008) that dealt with medieval translation as the adaptation and transmission of cultural inheritance. That conference was accompanied by two remarkable performance events that focused on Dante in modern translation. First, we ran a “Dante Marathon” in which volunteer faculty and students read aloud all 101 Cantos of *The Divine Comedy*, not only in Italian, but also in translation in as many other languages as could be mustered (altogether about a dozen). A Krannert Center for the Performing Arts “Culture Talk” event featured U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky (translator of the *Inferno*) and Pulitzer Prize winning

poet W. S. Merwin (translator of the *Purgatorio*), who read excerpts from their translations and addressed the challenges of translating the *Divina Commedia* and the reasons for Dante’s enduring appeal and relevance. Their memorable discussion was moderated by UIUC’s own distinguished novelist, Richard Powers. In 2008 another major conference, “From Magnificat to Magnificence: The Aesthetics of Grandeur,” was organized by Stephen Jaeger.

Richard Layton (Religion) served for one year (2009-10) as acting director. During that year the major MDVL conference was “Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Studies,” which made a comprehensive survey of the ways that critical theory was transforming Old English scholarship. Medieval Studies also co-sponsored two EALC symposia relating to pre-modern Japan: “Tales of the Heike: Variation, Canonization, Translation and ‘Japan’s Epic,’” and “Rethinking the Boundaries Between Religion and Culture in Premodern Japan”—harbingers of the program’s expansion into the Global Middle Ages.





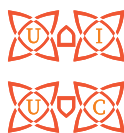
Globalizing Medieval Studies

The globalization of the Medieval Studies Program took place in 2010, but the ground had been prepared, and important steps in that direction had been taken, already in the program's first decade. Initially our geographical limits had been defined as Europe and the Near East. "The State of Medieval Studies" conference in 2003 had been organized along broadly national and linguistic lines covering the histories and literatures of Western Europe, but also ranged beyond them to include Byzantine studies and, more adventurously, Eurasia and Islam. The lead essay, Frits van Oostrom's "Spatial Struggles: Medieval Studies between Nationalism and Globalization," was perhaps the most eye-opening precisely because it questioned the limitation of "medieval studies" to Western cultures and sketched out the potential advantages of a globalization of our field, in terms not only of direct historical interactions (which have always been given some attention) but of comparative analysis of similar cultural phenomena. Early MDVL conferences and exhibitions such as "Encounters with Islam: The Medieval Mediterranean Experience" and "Art and Spirituality in the Medieval World" explored medieval cultural traditions across the entire

Mediterranean region. The first steps had also been taken by Hedeman, Fresco, and Layton to include MDVL faculty specialists in non-Western "medieval" cultures (that is, beyond Byzantium), branching out into the Islamic world and East Asia.

Despite these signal contributions to the emerging global turn in medieval studies, the program had not yet turned itself into a global one. The turning point came in 2010, prompted by serious faculty attrition and a dire university climate of cutbacks and consolidations in the wake of the Great Recession. The program's future direction was discussed that Spring at a faculty meeting convened by Layton, where it was decided to expand, not chronologically (by becoming a Medieval and Renaissance Program), but geographically (by becoming a global medieval studies program).

Charles D. Wright (English), an enthusiastic proponent of globalizing, agreed to become the next director, with the charge of implementing the program's reconfiguration. In the following years, the major tasks were to diversify MDVL faculty by identifying and offering appointments to all campus scholars who worked on non-Western cultures roughly



coeval with the medieval period in Europe; to dedicate resources and funding to fully integrate those fields into our programming; to decenter the Western European focus of our undergraduate and graduate curricula; and to foster the global turn in medieval studies by communicating our vision to the field at large and by working with other scholars and programs that had begun to move in the same direction. The effort launched publicly with our 2012 conference on “The Medieval Globe: Communication, Connectivity and Exchange,” and was followed up by the inauguration of our new program journal, *The Medieval Globe*.

As a result of our reconfiguration, EALC became the program’s largest participating department. EALC medievalists quickly organized a series of conferences and symposia, including “Cultural Transmission in Medieval East Asia (2011), “Stories of Chinese Poetic Culture: Earliest Times through the Tang Dynasty” (2012), “History of Non-book Publishing in China, Tang through Qing” (2013), and “Religious Performance, City and Country in East Asia” (2013). Faculty representation expanded also into the areas of Eastern Europe, Islamic civilization and Arabic literature, Jewish civilization, the Indian subcontinent, pre-colonial and early colonial West Africa, and the Pre-Columbian and colonial Americas. 2015 saw our first symposium that focused on the New World, “The Medieval Americas: Violence, Religion, and Cultural Exchange before Columbus.”

In 2013 the program welcomed as our Distinguished Visiting Scholar the British historian James Clark (Exeter University), a specialist in book history and Benedictine culture. While in residence at Illinois, Clark taught an eight-week graduate seminar “From Script to Print: The Transformation of Medieval Culture, c.1350-c. 1550,” and gave a lecture on “The Lost Books of Medieval England.” While working on medieval manuscripts in our Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Clark was able to identify for the first time the original owners of one of our most important illuminated manuscripts, the Lyte Book of Hours.

During her six-year tenure (2015-2021) as director, Wright’s successor **Eleonora Stoppino** (French & Italian) focused on internationalization, undergraduate education, and advancement. Internationalization



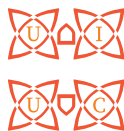
was both diachronic and synchronic: programming that highlighted transnational networks during the global Middle Ages coincided with the establishment of academic networks with medieval programs in Europe. A major conference co-organized by Stoppino and Renée Trilling, “Global Prehumanisms” (2018), brought new perspectives on global Medieval Studies by interrogating the distinction and interaction between the human and nonhuman in papers spanning the medieval world from Armenia to Japan to the Hudson Valley.

During this time faculty and graduate student exchanges were initiated with medieval programs in Europe. Under an exchange agreement with University of Stockholm, three MDVL faculty and two graduate students visited Sweden, and three Stockholm medievalists visited Urbana. In addition, a collaborative conference in Stockholm on “The Global North” led to a special issue of *The Medieval Globe*. A collaborative agreement with the University of Milan led to Maria Luisa Meneghetti’s residence here during Fall 2016 as George A. Miller Visiting Scholar, highlighted by her plenary lecture in a symposium on Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. And MDVL scholar D. Fairchild Ruggles was awarded a major Getty Foundation grant for a collaborative project at the Cyprus Institute: “Mediterranean Palimpsests: Connecting the Art and Architectural Histories of Medieval and Early Modern Cities.”

As defining as globalization has become for our program, medievalists at UIUC recognize that “the global Middle Ages” is a wide-angle view of a myriad of local, regional, and national medieval cultures and polities. (Since there are no unproblematic alternatives to the problematic Western



historiographical terms “Middle Ages” and “medieval,” our chosen course is to own them, while owning up to their shortcomings.) Focused local studies have always been, and will doubtless always remain, central to what we research and teach, and also a major element of our programming. In 2016, for example, one MDVL event focused on medieval Ireland in relation to a moment in the modern political history of Ireland and a moment in our own institutional history. “Medieval Irish Metalwork and Manuscripts in Modern Reproduction,” organized by Wright, was coordinated with an exhibit at the Spurlock Museum of World Cultures. These coincided with the centennial of the 1916 Easter Rising, and highlighted museum and library collections acquired on our campus at about the same time through the efforts of UIUC Celtic scholar Gertrude Schoepperle.





Advancement during Stoppino's directorship came in two very different forms. The program found its first major private benefactor, Nona Flores. A medievalist herself and editor of a frequently-cited volume on *Animals in the Middle Ages* (1996), Flores was a graduate student at UIUC in English during the late 70s and early 80s (with a 1981 PhD dissertation on the motif of the woman-headed serpent), and later taught at UI Chicago. Her gift to MDVL enabled the establishment of the annual Undergraduate Essay Prize for the best paper on a medieval topic, and Flores has continued to be a generous supporter of our program. Another advancement was of a very different kind (the in-kind). For most of its history the program had to do without its own office space. Upon Wright's retirement in 2018, Stoppino had the inspired idea that his office of 32 years would do nicely. Wright agreed to donate most of his personal library as the core of a medieval studies reference collection (Flores has since donated part of her own library), and Stoppino was able to negotiate with the English department the dedication of 107D English Building as the MDVL program office.

The pandemic years have been challenging for Medieval Studies, as they have been for all campus units. Our 2015 symposium on "The Black Death and Beyond," organized by Carol Symes in conjunction with the inaugural issue of *The Medieval Globe* on *The Black Death as a Global Pandemic*, brought medievalists and scientists together to correlate historical and epidemiological data and to situate "the Plague" in relation to other and more recent global pandemics. That symposium was more timely and prescient than we would have wished, or could have imagined. During the current pandemic, exchanges with programs abroad, in-person lectures and conferences, and on-campus outreach events came to a temporary halt, but the momentum of MDVL programming has been maintained with virtual events via Zoom. Our 2022 anniversary celebration—delayed by a year—will be the first major in-person MDVL event since the onset of the pandemic.

Looking Back, and Forward

The program's great successes have of course not come without obstacles and setbacks. The decision in 2000

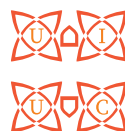
to propose a *Program in Medieval Studies* rather than a *Department of Medieval Studies* was a concession to institutional and budgetary realities. As a program, MDVL has no faculty of its own (all of our faculty have 0% appointments), so we cannot request new hires from the Colleges of LAS or FAA to build on strengths or to compensate for losses in participating departments. We are fortunate still to have about thirty MDVL faculty in more than a dozen departments across LAS, FAA, the iSchool, and the Library. Our current strength is not simply in raw numbers but in the sheer diversity—both chronological and geographical—of our faculty’s specializations.

Over the years the program has been very successful in recruiting new graduate students and—right up until the recent virtual collapse of the academic job-market—has had an enviable record of successful placement of MDVL concentration holders in both tenure-track professorships and rewarding non-academic careers. One of the main challenges of the future will be in assisting the graduate students we recruit to prepare themselves not just to compete for academic positions, but also to be prepared to turn their scholarly and pedagogical skill-sets to best advantage for possible alternative careers.

Growing our MDVL undergraduate cohort is major (and minor) unfinished business. The one constant over the years (and our best recruiting opportunity) has been the robust enrollments in our undergraduate medieval courses, especially in our lower-level general education courses. Many students are fascinated by the Middle Ages, and courses like “Viking Mythology,” “The Middle Ages in Popular Culture,” “Legends of King Arthur,” and the

globalized “Medieval Lit and Culture” always pack them in (sometimes to the bemusement of our modernist colleagues).

Twenty years on, the Program in Medieval Studies has a rich history. We have been at the forefront of developments in the field, from the forward-looking stock-taking of “The State of Medieval Studies” in 2003 to the many subsequent state-of-the-art conferences on major trends such as the representation of emotions, the cultural work of images and of translations, the dynamics of manuscript compilation, and the non-human dimensions of pre-modern history. We were ahead of the curve in the global turn, with one of the first conferences and first journals dedicated to global medieval studies, and with one of the first thorough-going global reconfigurations of a faculty and a curriculum. But what’s past is only prologue: what’s next is for the current generation of program medievalists to envision and build for themselves.

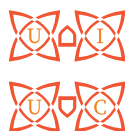


Faculty 2001-2022

Antony Augoustakis	Classics
Robert W. Barrett, Jr.	English
Jessica Birkenholtz	Religion
Claudia Bornholdt	Germanic Languages & Literatures
Clara Bosak-Schroeder	Classics
Gerald Browne	Classics
Zong-Qi Cai	East Asian Languages & Cultures
Eric Calderwood	Comparative & World Literatures
Martin Camargo	English
Paula Carns	Library
Anthony K. Cassell	Italian
Hsiao-Jane Anna Chen	Library
Kai-Wing Chow	East Asian Languages & Cultures
James Clark	Program in Medieval Studies
Thomas Conley	Communication
David Cooper	Slavic Languages & Literatures
Karen Fresco	French & Italian
Lori Garner	English
Heather Grossman	Architecture
Anne D. Hedeman	Art & Design
Caroline Hibbard	History
Verena Höfig	Germanic Languages & Literatures
Valerie Hoffman	Religion
Valerie Hotchkiss	Rare Book & Manuscript Library
C. Stephen Jaeger	Germanic Languages & Literatures
Marianne Kalinke	Germanic Languages & Literatures
Brett Kaufman	Classics
Herbert Kellman	Music
Mohammad Hassan Khalili	Religion
Douglas Kibbee	French & Italian
Craig Koslofsky	History
Lisa Lampert	English
Richard Layton	Religion
Lisa Lucero	Anthropology
Christopher Macklin	Music
Bonnie Mak	Information Sciences
Areli Marina	Art & Design



Ralph Mathisen	History
Alexander Mayer	East Asian Languages & Cultures
Megan McLaughlin	History
Robert Morrissey	History
Shankar Nair	Religion
Mauro Nobili	History
Kate Newton	English
Robert Ousterhout	Architecture
Elizabeth Oyler	East Asian Languages & Cultures
Timothy Pauketat	Anthropology
Curtis Perry	English
Gian Piero Persiani	East Asian Languages & Cultures
David Price	Religion
D. Fairchild Ruggles	Landscape Architecture
Brian Ruppert	East Asian Languages & Cultures
Frederick Schwink	Germanic Languages & Literatures
Danuta Shanzer	Classics
Jon Solomon	Classics
Andrea Stevens	English
Eleonora Stoppino	French & Italian
Carol Symes	History
Renée R. Trilling	English
Tom Ward	Music
Dov Weiss	Religion
Robert Wengert	Philosophy
Jeryldene Wood	Art & Design
Charles D. Wright	English





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