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## 1 The Introductory Elements in the Global Middle Ages Series

> The planetarity of which I have been speaking . . . is perhaps best imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet.
>
> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*

This is the first of two introductory Elements written by the editors of the Cambridge University Press series, Elements in the Global Middle Ages. This first introductory Element, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, is authored by Geraldine Heng, and accompanies the first-year rollout of titles in the Global Middle Ages series. The second introductory Element, *What Were the Middle Ages?*, authored by Susan Noakes, will accompany the second-year rollout of titles in the series.

*The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* discusses how, when, and why a "global Middle Ages" was conceptualized; explains and considers the terms that are deployed in studying, teaching, and researching a Global Middle Ages; and critically reflects on the issues that arise in the establishment of this relatively new field of academic endeavor.

This concise study considers key issues of vocabulary, chronology, and themes central to the conceptualization and theorization of the global in premodernity; treats the relationship of global premodernity to global modernity; and surveys a variety of approaches to the global in earlier and emergent scholarship. It also compares our current moment's scholarship on the global with preceding as well as ongoing programmatic scholarship on world-systems theories, and the teaching of world history and world literature, in higher education today.

The second introductory Element, *What Were the Middle Ages?,* considers in detail the historiography of the period that, in common academic vocabulary, is conventionally called "the Middle Ages," by which is meant the *European* Middle Ages: a posited interregnum in the West between two glorified ages of empire and authority, Greco-Roman antiquity and its so-called Renaissance – an interregnum identified, named, and constructed by early-modern historiographers.

As we proceed, it will be apparent to readers that the discussions and arguments in both introductory Elements bring into focus the sustained importance of *critical* reflection and *critical* analysis.

Self-conscious reflection on the animating terms, methods, and objectives undergirding the study of global premodernity is essential as we move across a plethora of geographic vectors, temporalities, and disciplines. The editors of this Elements series thus view our promulgation of a "Global Middle Ages" as a call for a critical early global studies, and not as another academic enterprise

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by which unreflectively descriptive, summative, and taxonomic accounts of premodern worlds are adduced to compile a view of early globalism.

Organizationally, this Element is structured into sections, with headings that indicate the focus of each section. All section headings appear in the Contents page, for ease in locating and browsing a particular section. Readers are thus free to follow their interests, and consult whatever topics and sections interest them, in whatever order they wish, without having to hew to a narrative progression. Because each Cambridge Element allows for periodic updating, the series editors welcome questions and suggestions for future consideration and treatment.

## 2 All Good Things Have a Beginning: The When, How, and What of the "Global Middle Ages"

In 2003–4, one of us, Geraldine Heng, conceptualized and brought into being a collaborative teaching experiment in graduate education at the University of Texas at Austin. As the incoming Director of Medieval Studies at the time, Heng's remit from the then Dean of Liberal Arts was to revitalize medieval studies on campus. She also wanted to reimagine medieval studies anew, for the twenty-first century.[1]

There were exigent reasons to prompt a reconceptualization of how we should teach the deep past, one of which directly addressed the needs of the sociopolitical moment. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the West seemed to find itself in a temporal wrinkle in which the "Middle Ages" – always understood as European, and seen as an interval between classical antiquity and its revival in the early-modern period – was being invoked again by world leaders in the West and Islamist militants alike with respect to phenomena that seemed remarkably transportable from the past to the present.

The foremost leader of the Western world, George W. Bush, like the extra-state militant actors he condemned, was expatiating on crusades and crusaders in the context of international war. A model of empire as a form of governmentality in international affairs was approvingly reemerging in political theory. Dispositions of race practiced at airport security checkpoints, in the news media, and in public conversation suggested that *religion* – the magisterial discourse of the European Middle Ages, just as science is the magisterial discourse of the modern eras – was once more on the rise as a mechanism by which absolute and fundamental distinctions could be delivered to set apart

[1] Some of the thoughts and arguments in this Element adapt, revise, or reissue some of Heng's earlier published work on the subject of the Global Middle Ages. From the next paragraph onward, the first-person-singular pronoun is used by Heng.

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human groups and populations by positing strategic essentialisms in a quasi-medieval racialization of religion.[2]

Even as the West was being haunted by premodern time, however, humanities departments teaching the past in institutions of higher learning continued to be calcified along disciplinary, national literature, national history, and area studies lines that atomized teaching; this made almost impossible a broad view across civilizations and systems that could deliver a multilayered, critical sense of the past in our time.

Nor did September 11 decenter the near-exclusive focus on Europe in literature and history departments in which the medieval period was taught. At best, courses like "Europe and Its Others" continued to be offered, and a new enthusiasm for teaching the crusades appeared. Area studies programs focusing on various territorial regions – the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, and so forth – continued not to engage substantively with the teaching and study of other geographic zones and sociopolitical formations of the premodern world outside their specialized regions.

Augmenting the sense of urgency to deliver to students a multilayered view of the world in which the world's many vectors existed in intricate interrelationship was another, more quotidian imperative. I hoped that the experiment would incubate new habits of thinking and research among graduate students – foster a habit of reaching across cultures and methods, even as individual departments continued to ensure accreditation in local disciplinary training and knowledges – and that the process would, in time, produce a distinctive group identity for graduate students in a contracting national academic market.

Yet another urgent aim was to bring medieval studies, a field that was too often dismissed as concerned with largely obscure interests – with knowledges, it was thought, mainly interesting to academic antiquarians performing custodial functions for archives of little importance to anyone else – more visibly into conversation with other kinds of teaching and investigation in the twenty-first-century academy.

In 2003, an article by Kate Galbraith in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* had shown precisely what was at stake, by pointing to dangers that lay ahead for a field whose interests were thought to be unimportant to the rest of the academy, and unimportant to society at large. Galbraith reported *The Guardian*, quoting Charles Clarke, Great Britain's Secretary of Education at the time, declaring unctuously at University College, Worcester: "I don't mind

[2] On the neomedievalism and neoconservatism of the first decade of the twenty-first century, see Holsinger and Lampert. On race, see Heng, *The Invention of Race.*

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there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them."

While medievalists in Great Britain were stung by Clarke's condescension and insult, they also seemed to flounder when trying to argue for their work's importance. A Cambridge University medievalist was quoted as falling back on an old academic vagueness, when she indignantly defended medievalists as "working on clarity and the pursuit of truth." Her lament that Clarke was "someone who doesn't understand what we do" touched on precisely the problem.[3]

Today, in 2021, the situation in Great Britain only appears to have worsened, as the University of Leicester reportedly prepares to replace its medieval curriculum with a decolonial curriculum prioritized by university administrators as urgently necessary in twenty-first-century England (Johnston, "Leicester University Considers Lessons in Diversity").

For the instructional faculty at the University of Texas, the opportunity to teach collaboratively was also attractive. Collaborative, interdisciplinary work in the humanities was the dream of many, but a dream that was often elusive. A classroom was a practical place for a beginning.[4]

To experiment with an alternative kind of learning, I assembled an instructional team of five faculty members from different departments, centers, and programs on campus, and two visiting faculty, to introduce to graduate students an interconnected, uncentered world, with points of viewing in the West and in Islamicate civilizations; trans-Saharan and North Africa; South Asia and India; the Eurasian continent; and China and East Asia. The "Global Middle Ages," a term I quickly coined in 2003 out of curricular and pedagogical necessity – mere expediency – was born.

It will hardly surprise any educator to hear that the classroom is an important incubator of new concepts and new projects. Faced with keen-eyed students eager to see what a different kind of pedagogy can deliver, the improvisations of instructors quickly devolve into strategies, and the strategies begin to plot pathways through intellectual thickets and carve a path into the future.

[3] In the United States, the ascent of white supremacists, nationalist extremists, and the alt-right – rabid racemongers who have deployed medieval symbols and images in support of their cause – means that medieval studies is less often seen today as an irrelevant discipline of interest mainly to antiquarians. See Kim, Lomuto, and Rambaran-Olm for examples of the use of the medieval past in ultraright violence.

[4] The senior administrators who supported the experiment in collaborative teaching – the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and the Dean of the Graduate Division – saw that the course could function as a test case to identify obstacles to interdepartmental teaching, and, if such teaching proved feasible and desirable, identify solutions that could be entrenched as precedents for future collaborative instruction.

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The instructional team decided to introduce cultures and vectors as interdependent but also discrete formations, without privileging any locations, and examined through a linked set of issues, questions, and themes. A decentered world would counter the ubiquity of Eurocentrism in pedagogy, and address the concerns of some areas studies scholars – such as those in Indian Ocean studies who objected to what they saw as the hegemony of Mediterranean studies (Grewal 187). To cultivate new contexts for studying a multilocational, uncentered past, the instructors did not descriptively survey, but critically assessed, the materials with which the class conjured.

In this way, the seminar sought not to replicate the world history surveys that were beginning to gain traction in the academy at the undergraduate level in lower-division courses of the early 2000s. Although world history surveys were, and remain, extremely important in delivering a broad perspective of the world, the instructors wanted greater depth of analysis for a graduate seminar, and to sustain an incrementally thickened sense, from week to week, of the complex interrelations that webbed the globe.

Fortunately, given that the fields of the instructional faculty included literary studies, social history, art history, material culture, religious studies, women's studies, the history of science and mathematics, and law and linguistics, interdisciplinarity was an inescapable condition of the teaching.

But rather than codify a priori how interdisciplinarity would function in the classroom, the instructional team of "Global Interconnections: Imagining the World 500–1500" worked through the pragmatics of the day-to-day pedagogical process, each member teaching from the disciplinary assumptions and practices most familiar to them, while reaching across to address what differed from their practices in the examples offered by their colleagues. The classroom was thus modeled as a kind of laboratory, with an open-ended process of trial, correction, and experimentation.

To the euphoria of all involved, the experiment proved a resounding success: Some students even voiced objections and regret that the course had to end at all. Everyone found the experiment exhilarating, and simply unlike any classroom experience we had known before.[5] Those involved included the then Dean of Liberal Arts, who had immediately volunteered to

[5] For detailed descriptions of the syllabus, the students, the problems that had to be overcome, and student conference papers and publications that resulted, as well as other features of the course, see Heng, "The Global Middle Ages" and Heng, "An Experiment in Collaborative Humanities." I first published an essay on the course in the *Medieval Academy Newsletter* (September 2004) at the invitation of the then Executive Director of the Medieval Academy of America, Richard K. Emmerson.

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teach in the course when it was being designed[6] and two high-performing undergraduates who had special permission to enroll in a graduate class that met for six intense hours a week in the classroom and many more hours outside.

In its wake, as I lectured and published on how to conceptualize and teach a Global Middle Ages, I was asked, again and again: Why can't learning be more often like this? In response to that prompting, the coeditor of this Element series, Susan Noakes, then Director of the Center of Medieval Studies at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and I formally convened the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP) in 2007. Cohosting a workshop at the University of Minnesota, we invited premodernists and humanists from institutions of higher learning coast-to-coast in the United States, across several disciplines, to thrash out questions of terminology, definitions, timelines, and other issues.

Section 7 discusses the processes by which participants in that 2007 workshop arrived at the decision to retain the name, "the Global Middle Ages," which had been improvised out of expediency and necessity, despite the problematic nature of the name. The Global Middle Ages Project soon expanded into digital realms, as a way to forge a path to learning beyond the walls of a classroom. In 2008–9, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) digital humanities grant, awarded to Illinois Computing in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Science (iCHASS) for G-MAP and two other projects, and coordinated by Kevin D. Franklin, iCHASS's Executive Director, brought groups of G-MAP's premodernists to three supercomputing centers – the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), the San Diego Supercomputing Center (SDSC), and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) – to learn about high-performing computational methods and techniques. Subsequently, Susan Noakes convened a workshop at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, on the digitizing of Istanbul/Constantinople, and a workshop in Tanzania, East Africa, on the digitizing of premodern Africa.

In 2011, Oxford historians in the United Kingdom convened a year-long series of workshops on the Global Middle Ages, inviting Noakes to the first of these, and following with a conference in 2012 and more workshops. Oxford's Centre for Global History soon launched a web page announcing the creation of

[6] A complicated "points" system accounting for faculty labor at the University of Texas in Austin required the Dean of Liberal Arts to approve staff releases to enable faculty to teach in this course. I was astonished (and greatly encouraged) when the then Dean of Liberal Arts, the Sanskritist Richard W. Lariviere (later provost at the University of Kansas, then president at the University of Oregon, and subsequently president of the Field Museum in Chicago until his retirement in August 2020), promptly volunteered to teach in the course himself. He proved a popular teacher, and a favorite of all the students in the seminar.

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"a UK-based network of medievalists with interest in the global which has recently gained an AHRC [Arts and Humanities Research Council] network grant." In spring 2012, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign convened a symposium entitled "The Medieval Globe: Communication, Connectivity, and Exchange," to which I was invited, a first step toward establishing a new academic journal, *The Medieval Globe*.

In 2012–13, Susan Noakes and I convened the Winton Seminar at the University of Minnesota, reshaping the original Texas course as a year-long graduate/postdoctoral/faculty seminar, with seventeen visiting and on-campus seminar leaders: "Early Globalities I: Eurasia and the Asia Pacific" in fall 2012 and "Early Globalities II: Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic" in spring 2013."

Two years later, with the aid of a Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, we launched a series of digital projects on www.globalmiddleages.org as a cybernetic classroom: a gateway to a kaleidoscope of learning that takes place outside university walls, and is open to all. The syllabus of the two-semester Winton Seminar can now be found on the Global Middle Ages platform at www.globalmiddleages.org/content/teaching.

A "Global Middle Ages" – transhumanities work that asks humanities scholars to step outside their discipline and area specialization to engage with other humanities scholars, social scientists, computer technologists, musicologists, archeologists, designers, and others to make sense of an interconnected past – now appears an idea whose time has arrived.

In the less than two decades since the term was coined, universities and colleges in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia have begun undergraduate concentrations and graduate programs on a Global Middle Ages. Edinburgh University offers a Master's degree in art history on the Global Middle Ages, and Birmingham University offers a PhD degree on "Borders and Borderlands in the Global Middle Ages." In the United States, the universities of Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Texas, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and Georgetown University, among other institutions, have had courses or programs, undergraduate and graduate, on a Global Middle Ages.

Three journals have emerged as the publications of record for this new field – *The Medieval Globe*, *Medieval Worlds*, and *The Journal of Medieval Worlds* – while an older journal, *Medieval Encounters,* which concentrated in the past primarily on interfaith encounters, and mostly in the Mediterranean, has retooled to incorporate a more global focus.

Academic symposia and conferences on the Global Middle Ages also abound. Among other venues, symposia and conferences on the Global

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Middle Ages have been held at: the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (2012), the Eastern European University (2014), the University of Wisconsin–Madison (2015), the Medieval Association of the Pacific at the University of California, Davis (2016), Indiana University (2016), the University of California, Los Angeles (2016, in art history), the J. Paul Getty Museum (2016, paired with a curated exhibition of global manuscripts that drew one million visitors), the University of Sydney (2016), and the University of Arizona (2014–17). Sydney University created The Global Middle Ages Research Group, a pan-Australian/New Zealand collaboration, in 2016.

As if to confer institutional blessing, the Medieval Academy of America, the flagship academic institution of medieval studies in North America, decided that the theme of its 2019 annual meeting in Philadelphia would be "The Global Turn." The Medieval Academy has also instituted a collaborative project with the National Humanities Center at the Research Triangle in the United States to produce a program of instruction and curricula for K-12 and college and university teachers on a Global Middle Ages. Since 2019, global-themed panels at conferences, symposia, and workshops have become increasingly common internationally.

Articles, special issues of journals, and edited anthologies on some aspect of a Global Middle Ages have also become increasingly common in the last decade, especially in the fields of history, art history, and literary-cultural studies, and are now too numerous to list. Publishers themselves began to commission texts: the Cambridge Elements series in the Global Middle Ages of which this introductory Element is a part, is one of these publishing initiatives.

Collaborative grants have been awarded by foundations to universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia to advance research, teaching, and digital humanities on a Global Middle Ages. In the United States, a half-million-dollar Mellon grant was awarded to the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, for courses and teaching on the global in premodern and early-modern studies; iCHASS was awarded a quarter-million-dollar NEH digital humanities grant for training and workshops at supercomputing centers; and the University of Texas was awarded a two-year CLIR/Mellon grant for a postdoctoral fellow to create the *MappaMundi* platform and digital projects at www.globalmiddleages.org. The University of California system awarded a generous collaborative grant to a consortium of historians at their Berkeley, Santa Barbara, and Davis campuses for research projects, workshops, and a new University of California Press journal, *The Journal of Medieval Worlds*. Oxford's Centre for Global History and Sydney University, have also been awarded grants for research and conferences on the Global Middle Ages.

These days, you can even buy flashcards online on the Global Middle Ages.

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## 3 "An Idea Whose Time Has Come": Why the Global Turn in Premodern Studies Matters

The ease and rapidity with which the *idea* of the Global Middle Ages has spread, and the new-found enthusiasm for the global in early studies, suggests that teachers and scholars today are looking for something new to drive the transformation of early studies in the twenty-first-century academy. That enthusiasm for transformation in early global studies is not merely confined to premodernists: G-MAP's digital, teaching, and research projects on early globalism have been supported by modernists too, heralded by Cathy Davidson in *Academe* and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *PMLA* (166) as new ways to undertake teaching, collaborative work, and even reading in the twenty-first-century academy.

I like to think that this new-found enthusiasm for the global issues from the simple fact that the *gains* accruing from viewing the past globally are considerable. A global perspective of the deep past not only counters Eurocentrism, but can transform our very understanding of history and of time itself. It enables us to identify, for instance, not just a single Scientific and Industrial Revolution that occurred once, and exclusively in the West, but the recurrence of *multiple* scientific and industrial revolutions in the non-Western, nonmodern world.

For instance, the surviving artifacts of a ninth-century Arab ship recovered off the coast of the island of Belitung in Indonesia show us that Tang China mass-produced commercial ceramics on an industrial scale for the international export market nearly a thousand years before mass ceramic production in the West. When oceangoing transports were carrying 70,000 Chinese ceramic wares with features that were popular in the overseas market but not in China, and repeatedly crisscrossed the global maritime routes between the Persian Gulf and the port cities of ninth-century Tang China, we have material evidence of nonmodern industrialization on an impressively massive scale.[7]

Nor was Tang China's industrialization a singular event. The Sinologist Robert Hartwell's data shows us that the tonnage of coal burnt in Song China's iron and steel industries in the eleventh century was already "roughly 70% of the total amount of coal used by all metal workers in Great Britain at the beginning of the 18$^{th}$ century" – evidence, again, of nonmodern industrialization, this time in iron and steel manufactures, many centuries before the "Industrial Revolution" of the West (Hartwell, "A Cycle of Economic Change in Imperial China" 122; see also Hartwell, "A Revolution in the Chinese Iron and Coal Industries").

[7] This is a brief summary of long and complex arguments. For the long-form version, see Heng, "An Ordinary Ship."

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The work of Joseph Needham and others, long known to historians of Chinese science, has for decades pointed to China's scientific, technological, and industrial innovations. However, because intergenerational transfers of knowledge tend to occur within academic silos that are sectioned off into departments, programs, and area studies, the "Scientific" and "Industrial" Revolutions remain "undead" – in the words of Mario Biagioli – both in the popular imagination and academic discourse today, as unique, exceptional, and singular phenomena. They continue to be taught as part of the foundational narratives of Western exceptionalism (see Hart, "Great Explanandum").[8]

By contrast, looking globally – and helped by the transdisciplinary impetus of a Global Middle Ages – we are afforded windows into deep time that open onto the existence of early, and multiple, industrial revolutions that can reshape our understanding of the past.[9] We become aware that what we are habituated to seeing as a singular and unique Industrial Revolution that only occurs once, and exclusively in the West, issues from a Eurocentric historiography that has reproduced, for generations, a grand foundationalist narrative of Western exceptionalism that is taught, and retaught, in academic silos of knowledge transmission.

Usefully, a transdisciplinary study of the global past in deep time erodes foundationalist narratives of a unique European genius, essence, climate, mathematical aptitude, scientific bent, or any other environmental, societal, genetic, or cognitive matrix guiding destiny in the "rise of the West" (a related grand narrative of the foundationalist kind).[10]

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8 Even linear algebra began in China, and moved westward, as the mathematician and Sinologist Roger Hart points out, undercutting claims of a unique Western genius for mathematics (see Hart, *Chinese Roots of Linear Algebra*).

9 The poetic term, "deep time," is Wai Chee Dimock's, and adapted from the physical sciences.

10 Rather than a unique European genius for science and technology, or a climate or environment that favored the West, history shows us that Western invasion, extraterritoriality, and colonialism are often the direct triggers for the so-called "rise of the West." The two-century history of the Crusades, for example, shows how, despite the eventual loss of all territories in Syria and Palestine, crusader colonization witnessed crucial transfers of agricultural, industrial, architectural, and engineering knowledges from the Levant to Europe, enabling the growth of European industries, agriculture, infrastructure, and artisanry. Europe's early colonial experiments thus shifted the economic calculus in favor of the Latin West, so that by the end of the medieval period – in an ironic reversal of their trade roles early in the Middle Ages – the East came to assume the erstwhile role of the West as exporter of raw materials over manufactures (see Heng, "Reinventing Race, Colonization, and Globalisms").

It is well documented that the dominance of Islamicate and Greek societies was eroded in export industries like sugar, textiles, and even fine, transparent glass. The economic consequences of the twelfth-century transfer of glassblowing technologies from Tyre to Venice can still be seen in the twenty-first century – it is Venice's Murano glass today, not Lebanese Tyrian glass, that is globally renowned and collected. As William Phillips wryly observes in his study of sugar production, while "the Crusades may have failed … in economic terms, they were successful, as the West wrested economic ascendancy from the East" (403).

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