

Ildar H. Garipzanov

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in Modern Medieval Studies***

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INTERDISCIPLINARITY, INTERNATIONALIZATION, AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN MODERN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Ildar H. Garipzanov

Quo vadis, Medieval Studies? It isn't accidental that this question has been asked in the Department of Medieval Studies at CEU, where an interdisciplinary approach to the Middle Ages has defined both the graduate curriculum and research. Yet does this question make much sense outside the department's headquarters in Budapest? The answer will pretty much depend on the country where one lives and works. If one resides in Russia, as I did in the 1990s, the answer is quite simple: medieval studies as an independent discipline goes nowhere! To the best of my knowledge, no Russian university has a department of medieval studies. Medieval topics are studied at the Russian Academy of Sciences, but this institution is outside the university system. There is no institute of medieval studies in Russia. The sectors/centers in the Academy of Sciences are dedicated to very narrow topics and there is a lack of collaboration among them, especially when they belong to different institutes.

To take historians as an example, Russian historians dealing with the medieval period work at the departments of history and would identify themselves as historians rather than medievalists. Of course, there are several departments of medieval history (meaning Western European medieval history) limited to a few top-ranked institutions like Moscow State University¹ and several highly specialized centers dealing with medieval topics in the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, primarily in the Institute of World History² and the Institute of Slavic Studies,³ but beyond the Russian capital medieval studies can hardly be described as

¹ But, for instance O. V. Loseva, the author of *Russkije mesiatseslovny XI-XIV vekov* [The Russian menologia of the Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries] (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2001), is a graduate of the Department of Russian History up to the Nineteenth Century.

² Among the innovative interdisciplinary studies published by the Institute of World History, see especially *Slovar' srednevekovoj kul'tury* [The Dictionary of Medieval Culture], ed. A. Ja. Gurevich (Moscow: Rosspen 2003); and A. V. Nazarenko, *Drevnaja Rus' na mezhdunarodnykh putiakh: Mezhdisciplinarnye ocherki kul'turnykh, torgovykh, politicheskikh svyazей IX-XII vekov* [Early Rus' on International Roads: Interdisciplinary Essays on Cultural, Commercial, and Political Connections from the Ninth to the Twelfth Centuries] (Moscow: Jazyki russkoj kul'tury, 2001).

³ Among substantial scholarly contributions produced by the Institute of Slavic Studies, see, for example *Khristianstvo v stranakh Vostochnoj, Jugo-Vostochnoj i Central'noj Evropy na poroge vtorogo*

an independent academic field. This is due partly to the limited financing of the arts and sciences in Russia, but even more to the fact that medieval studies have never been accepted there as an autonomous field comparable, for example, to Classics.

Meanwhile, this situation is not peculiar to Russia, but can be observed in other parts of the world. The Department of Medieval Studies at CEU is rather a unique case in this regard, and its successful history has owed a great deal to the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet block the medieval past all of a sudden became highly relevant to the current redefinition of political communities and alliances and national and cultural identities in Central Europe. Another similar case is the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Bergen (accessible at <http://www.uib.no/cms/>), where I am privileged to work right now. Currently, it is the only institutionally coherent center for medieval studies in Scandinavia. One must keep in mind that the longest period when the Kingdom of Norway was independent of Denmark or Sweden was during the Middle Ages. Therefore, the medieval past has carried as much significance for modern Norway as it has for Central Europe, which partly explains why the Norwegian Research Council supported the establishment of such a center of excellence back in 2002. Yet, because the center has been established as an exceptional case with secure financing until 2012, its creation has not challenged the traditional institutional division in Scandinavia between historians, archeologists, and historians of arts and religion.

This institutional division is less pronounced within Anglophone academia. But after mingling in the past six years with people attending international congresses of medieval studies in Leeds and Kalamazoo, I can conclude that the vast majority of them have been affiliated with the departments of history or English, with a clear thematic division between the representatives of these two disciplines. What has been more typical of large universities in Western Europe and North America in the past few decades is an interdisciplinary program in medieval studies coordinating faculty members and students from departments of history, languages, visual arts, philosophy, theology, and so on, and often offering an MA in medieval studies. Such programs exist in major academic schools in the US and UK: for example, at Fordham University (accessible at <http://www.fordham.edu/mvst/>), where I spent five years of my graduate studies. The degree of collaboration between departments

tysiacheletija [Christianity in the Countries of Eastern, Southeastern and Central Europe at the Turn of the First Millennium], ed. B. N. Floria (Moscow: Jazyki slavianskoj kul'tury, 2002); and A. A. Zalizniak, *Drevnenovgorodkij dialekt* [The Old Novgorodian Dialect], 2d ed. (Moscow: Jazyki slavianskoj kul'tury, 2004).

in such programs can be quite high at some universities; still, it can never reach the institutional coherence achieved in Budapest or Bergen. The advantages of such a program are that, on the one hand, it offers a discussion venue for medievalists across various humanities departments and, on the other hand, students receive “proper” doctoral degrees in history, English, theology, and so on which better adjust graduates to the realities of the academic job market in the US and Europe. The side effect of the latter concern is, of course, that the number of interdisciplinary courses offered within such programs is quite limited and most graduate curricula are linked to the home department of a student and his/her supervisor.

Moreover, the center at Fordham demonstrates another trend especially strong in the US, namely, to place archeology along with anthropology in the social sciences and thus to separate it from history and other arts. As a result, archeologists and historians working in medieval studies often speak different “languages” and do not understand each other properly. Interdisciplinary studies built upon both archeological and textual evidence remain rare,⁴ and the appeal of John Moreland for a more intensive collaboration between the two disciplines in reconstructing the historical past continues to remain highly relevant to both historians and archeologists.⁵ Thus, it seems that the current academic structure of universities in North America and Europe sets institutional limits on interdisciplinarity inherent in the concept of medieval studies as a separate field, which makes the quest for truly interdisciplinarity in this field a work in progress for us and future generations of medievalists.

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Besides institutional limits, another major challenge to medieval studies as a coherent field is how to define its value for and relevance to the modern world. Classics were established as an independent academic field in such countries as the US, the UK, or Germany to a large extent due to the great value of the Classical heritage for modern Western democracies. In this perspective, Classical Greece and Rome have been viewed as the cradle of Western civilization. Can the medieval past be invested with public value comparable that one attached to the Classical heritage?

As mentioned above, one of the answers has been to look at the regional medieval past for the origins of modern European nations, with the result, that for example, in most European countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Russia the vast

⁴ For example, see Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: Communication and Commerce AD 300-900* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

⁵ John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

majority of medieval historians do national medieval history with little interest in similar topics in other countries. Hence, internationalization in medieval studies is much needed, especially in Scandinavia, East Central, and Eastern Europe. The truth of the matter is that most recent innovative works employing new methods and approaches to medieval studies have been published in the UK, North America, Germany, and France and are based on evidence deriving from Western Europe.

The unique five-year international project on the Transformation of the Roman World, initiated by the European Science Foundation in 1993, illustrates this trend quite well. One of the main participants of the project, Ian Wood, has written that “its main achievement has been to shift perceptions – that is, we have become familiar with the material and methodologies of others: we have also looked outside established geographical bounds, in terms of what scholars from other countries know, and of how they treat their material.”⁶ Yet the project included scholars mostly from Western Europe; East Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia do not feature much in the resulting fifteen volumes. Of course, at that time the project was financed by the EU in its search for a common European past, but the later expansion of the EU to the east has not changed the this trend much.

A recent volume on early medieval Europe by Julia Smith with the subtitle “A New Cultural History 500-1000” is representative in this regard.⁷ The book deals with new topics introduced to medieval studies in the past fifteen years such as friendship and kinship, literacy and orality, gender and family relations, gift exchange, patronage, and social status. Yet the early medieval Europe of that book is mostly confined to the British Isles, the Low Countries, France, and the parts of Germany, Spain, and Italy. The rest of Europe is almost entirely absent from the book’s horizon. The concept of the “Dark Ages” has now been rejected by medievalists, but it seems that its spirit still shapes the perception of “peripheral” regions of medieval Europe in medieval studies.

Thus, medievalists from these so-called “peripheral” regions have to do much work of sharing their evidence and research results with their colleagues from “Medieval Europe Proper” to overcome this trend. In practice, this task demands publishing not only in native languages, but also in languages read by the majority of Western medievalists – English, German, or French – and collaborating more actively with academic centers in Western Europe and North America. The role

⁶ Ian Wood, “Report: The European Science Foundation’s Programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and Emergence of Early Medieval Europe,” *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997): 217-227, at 226.

⁷ Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

of medieval centers like those in Budapest and Bergen is crucial in such efforts. Even more importantly, they have to substantially increase their presence in international projects comparing various regions of medieval Europe in regard to various aspects of the Middle Ages, as has been done in the recent project edited by Nora Berend.⁸ Such collaborative projects demand that scholars not only be familiar with the material from their home countries, but also be capable of setting it in the established master narrative of the Middle Ages. Only in this case can their studies of local medieval pasts become relevant to medieval studies as a whole.

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Another way of investing the Middle Ages with special public value has been to emphasize its Christian nature. This has been the case especially in the US, where many medieval centers have been created at universities established or influenced by Catholic institutions, which tend to be especially keen on preserving a Catholic tradition and hence encouraging the study of the Christian Middle Ages. The interdisciplinary medieval center at Fordham exemplifies this trend; Fordham University was established by the Jesuits and a Jesuit tradition continues to be important for its mission and institutional identity. Furthermore, a similar interest in the Christian aspect of the Middle Ages can be observed not only in the US, but also in Europe. This is especially true for East Central and Eastern Europe where studies in the regional Christian past have increased considerably with a “Christian revival” following the collapse of crusading atheism. From the 1990s onwards, a similar growing academic interest in the Christian Middle Ages was manifest in Scandinavia, where its Catholic past was rather of lesser significance previously but has been increasingly seen as an element unifying this region with the rest of Europe.

Current growth in studies dealing with various aspects of medieval Christianity has also been encouraged by recent methodological changes in medieval academia, most importantly, by the diminishing appeal of New Social History and the proliferation of cultural studies inspired by Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory.⁹ Applied to the Middle Ages, the latter concept inevitably brings Christianity, Islam, and Judaism or their interactions into the epicenter of most studies on cultural memory and identity in this period, and the number of such studies have sky-rocketed under the influence of the post-modernist turn of the 1990s.

⁸ *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

⁹ Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-133.

The recent global challenge of Islamic terrorism to developed countries has not only revived crusading rhetoric among the neo-conservatives but also made the Christian identity of Western civilization ultimately more transparent to the general public. It is symbolic that Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), up-dating the patriarchal narrative of the New Testament to the perception of gender roles in post-modernist Western society, became a worldwide bestseller a few years after the 9/11 attack. It is also noteworthy that the Christian Middle Ages play a crucial role in the novel's plot. This public interest went side by side with an academic one. A recent book by Rosamond McKitterick on the age of Charlemagne and the creation of a European identity clearly illustrates this point by presenting Carolingian cultural identity as the basis of a modern European one and emphasizing the crucial role of the Christian faith, ritual, and morality in its creation.¹⁰ It should not be forgotten that Charlemagne and his empire have often been rhetorically invoked in modern public discourse as precursors of the European Union, which makes McKitterick's perspective all the more relevant to present-day Europe. Yet one must remember that medieval Christianity developed in Europe in close contact and interactions with pre-Christian beliefs, Islam, and Judaism. One can simply refer to the Cordoban Emirate, the Muslim kingdom of the Volga Bulgars or the Jewish khaganate of Khazars. Aren't they also a part of medieval heritage for modern Europe? Yes, they are! Islam and Judaism were as present in the Christian Middle Ages as they have been in modern Europe, and medievalists have to be aware of this as much as the general public.

Finally, a medieval Christian identity as a meaningful whole and the basis for a modern European identity is to a large extent a historiographic construct built on material focused on Western Christendom and papal Rome. This approach defines the "Europeanness" of countries in Europe by their medieval affiliations with Latin Christendom and, by implication, questions the place of Orthodox Christian countries in a European cultural community. Was the Berlin Wall destroyed to be replaced by a new confessional wall? The comparative medieval material from East Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, I believe, is paramount for undermining this anachronistic construct and showing that, on the one hand, up to the late twelfth century the confessional division between Latin Christendom and Eastern Orthodoxy was less abrupt than one may think after reading polemic literature written in medieval Rome and Constantinople

¹⁰ *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

and that, on the other hand, the level of congruency within Latin Christendom has been exaggerated.¹¹ Christian cultural identity in medieval Europe differed depending on region and social status.

This agenda invigorates my current research project, entitled “The Forging of ‘Christian’ Identity on the Northern Periphery (c. 820-1200),” which aims at achieving a better understanding of the Christianization process in Northern Europe not only by the interdisciplinary study of Christian written texts, monuments of practical literacy, and material markers of Christian identity, but also by breaking confessional borders while comparing the process of conversion in Scandinavia and northern Rus’. Two conferences organized by my project have already shown the fruitfulness of such an approach. The materials from the first one, “Saints and Hagiography across Northern and Eastern Europe, c. 800-1200” (Bergen, June 2008), have clearly shown that the dissemination of the early culture of sanctity in these regions was not divided by confessional borders and that Christian impulses and contacts across these peripheral regions of Christian Europe were quite substantial. The second conference, “Early Christian Historical Narratives and the Construction of Christian Identity in Northern and Eastern Europe (11th-12th centuries)” (Kiev, December 2008), took another step in the same direction by showing that early Christian historical narratives appearing in Scandinavia, East Central and Eastern Europe in the twelfth century are typologically similar in spite of being written in Latin, Old Church Slavonic, and Old Norse. More results are to come in the next few years, and I hope that my project will contribute to our joint quest for truly interdisciplinary and internationalized medieval studies, in which the CEU Department of Medieval Studies has done so much since its establishment in 1993.

¹¹ The latter aspect has been repeatedly questioned in the past fifteen years, and the recent volume of *The Cambridge History of Christianity* dealing with the early medieval period expresses the new agenda in the subtitle: *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *Early Medieval Christianities c. 600–c. 1100*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).