General History II: 1000-1300 (Medieval)

This course explores a series of structures and processes over a period of three hundred years that were integral to the formation of Latin Christendom. This exploration involves attending to developments within a number of important practices and institutions in Western Europe itself, but also requires an understanding of changes in regions beyond western Europe, and an appreciation of the impact of hostile and peaceful encounters between western Europeans and representatives of other faiths and cultural traditions.

One way of interpreting the changes which occurred over this three-hundred-year period is to argue that in c.1000 Western (‘Latin’) Europe was typified by a largely agrarian society, substantial political fragmentation, a political culture dominated by unregulated violence, and highly localised religious practices. It was neighboured to the south by the territorially more powerful and culturally more sophisticated Islamic and Byzantine worlds, and to the north and east by pagans or only recently converted Christians who retained many alien political and cultural practices. According to this line of thinking the next three centuries saw substantial internal strengthening and unification within Latin Christendom, observable in developments within both religious and secular culture; at the same time there was substantial external expansion, much of it involving religious warfare, at the expense of neighbouring cultures. Yet, while the unification and expansion of Latin Christendom are leitmotifs of this course, there is a paradox in that many of those developments also led to new forms of fragmentation, dissent, and contest. The study of topics such as heresy and gender allow us to probe the uneasy relationships between inclusion and exclusion, expansion and fragmentation inside Latin Christendom. An excellent way of assessing developments within Latin Europe since 1000 is to examine how western Christians responded to the arrival in the mid-thirteenth century of a powerful new threat: the pagan Mongols.

Through tutorials and lectures this course focuses on the key features of the growth and expansion of Latin Christendom while also looking at the neighbouring cultures. Crucial institutions such as kingship, papacy and empire are assessed. Attention is paid to the growth of towns, villages and trade, the product of a continental-wide experience of agrarian expansion. Important dimensions to the religious culture of Latin Christendom are analysed including monasticism, pilgrimage, crusade, and universities. Developments within secular culture and their overlap with religious practice are explored through analysis of knighthood and chivalry. The encounter of Latin Europe with neighbouring cultures focuses principally on frontier regions such as Iberia, Sicily, Byzantium and the Baltic.