In August of 2017, neo-Nazis carrying signs proclaiming the Crusaders’ motto “Deus vult” marched across the University of Virginia’s campus in Charlottesville, VA. While nominally a protest of the removal of a Confederate monument, the group’s ahistorical mash-up of medieval Crusaders and Confederate slaveholders dragged into the spotlight how deeply implicated the Middle Ages are in modern conversations about race, religion, and national identity. These conversations often begin with an assumption common to new students of the Middle Ages: that the medieval world was exclusively white, Christian and European. In recent years, this false conception of the Middle Ages has been employed by racist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic groups in Charlottesville and elsewhere to justify hatred and exclusion on the basis of an imaginary shared white past.

It is therefore vital for medievalists at all levels of education to teach the Middle Ages in opposition to this narrative – to reveal the medieval world in its true historical diversity as a web of economic, religious, and political connections that stretched between cultures and across continents. In the classroom, I have found that one effective way to do so is to teach texts that demonstrate how our modern conversations about race, religion, and the formation of states and
peoples are not uniquely modern, but in fact have been taking place across the world for centuries. Within medieval literature, these conversations take place in some of their most accessible forms in travel narratives. In the spring of 2018, directly in the wake of the alt-right demonstration in Charlottesville, I taught an interdisciplinary upper-level seminar on medieval travel narratives called “Mapping the Global Middle Ages,” a course designed to highlight the diverse traditions and encounters that medieval people experienced through travel.

When teaching these travel narratives, I have contended with two recurring problems. First, students often come to my class with an unconscious yet persistent belief in historical teleology, assuming both that the current state of Western hegemony was inevitable, and that we can simply project modern Western ideas about race and nation backward upon the Middle Ages. Second, and more surprising, was that students have very little sense of the sheer scale of the medieval world. Their deeply ingrained conception of the Middle Ages as isolated, fractured, and incurious, combined with a general lack of geographic or spatial knowledge, made it difficult to convey the human consequences of abstract ideas like cross-continental trade or inter-cultural contact.

To combat both of these issues, I designed a course in which students could experience life as a medieval traveler, or at least as closely as digital simulacra could approximate. Each student chose a single traveler from a medieval travel narrative and followed his or her journey throughout the semester. In addition to conducting literary analysis on the text itself, they carried out historical research about the locations discussed in the text and learned to use ArcGIS to map the physical journey of the traveler. In a series of scaffolded assignments, they examined the physical terrain of the journeys, the distances traveled, the modes of travel, the different cultures and peoples encountered, and the ways in which these travelers described the things they saw to
their anticipated audiences back home. Alongside their individual investigations, we read broadly as a class about issues of race, nationalism, religion, and trade in the medieval world.

This dual approach -- part individual, self-guided research project; part instructor-guided seminar -- gave students simultaneous access to multiple modes of learning. Practically speaking, these multiple modes played out at different speeds across the length of the semester. Each student was required to choose a traveler to work with by the end of the third week, and every graded assignment built upon their choice of traveler. Students could choose any medieval traveler and narrative from our syllabus, which spanned the period from 900-1500, including the following:

- Ibn Fadlan, *Risalah*, 10th century (traveled 921-922)\(^5\)
- Abu Hamid Al-Garnati, *Tuhat al-albab wa nukhbat al-‘aja‘ib*, 12th century (traveled 1130-55)\(^6\)
- Benjamin of Tudela, *Masa‘ot Binyamin*, 12th century (traveled 1165-73)\(^7\)
- Marco Polo, *Livre des Merveilles du Monde*, 13th century (traveled 1271-94)\(^8\)
- Ibn Battutah, *Rihla*, 14th century (traveled 1325-47, 1349-54)\(^9\)
- John Mandeville, *The Book of John Mandeville*, 14th century (claimed to travel 1322-1355)\(^10\)
- Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium*, 15th century (traveled 1480-83)\(^12\)

All readings were in translation. These texts included three Muslim authors, four Christian authors, and one Jewish author; only one was female. Their combined journeys took them across Europe, the Middle East, North and East Africa, and East and South Asia. While all students eventually read all texts, the assignment structure required some students to read their chosen
texts well ahead of the rest of the class. The advantage of this necessity was that as we began each new text, we already had several ready-made experts on the subject in class who were invaluable in leading class discussion.

In brief, these are the scaffolded assignments. First, each student chose a traveler. Then, they skimmed the entire travel narrative and mapped the journey electronically using ArcGIS. Every other week, they chose one of those locations and wrote a blog post about the practical details of travel and the intercultural implications of the descriptions of various places. Finally, they chose a relevant medieval map and mapped their traveler’s journey again, this time to the kind of map that a medieval person might actually have seen; and wrote a final paper relating both map and text to one of the class’ primary themes of race, nation, and religion. The assignments were designed to build upon each other, each one requiring the knowledge and skills gained in the previous task.

**Teaching with ArcGIS**

GIS (Geographic Information Systems) is a technology designed to store, analyze, and visualize spatial data – that is, any data that can be associated with a specific geographic point. It has wide-ranging applications in healthcare, defense, transportation, engineering, agriculture, and many other fields. For this class, I created a project for students to use GIS to associate information about medieval travel routes – such as climate, terrain, cities, and roads – with historical research about specific locations along those routes.

We began with the practical: distance, time, and mode of transportation. To prepare for their first GIS assignments, students had to read their chosen travel narrative, then select at least ten points along the journey. In class, they learned how to add these points to the map, add metadata (such as how long the traveler stayed at each location, the weather, or the stop’s
purpose), and create routes between points. They determined whether their traveler walked, rode, or sailed for each leg of the journey and researched medieval travel capabilities to estimate how long each leg would have taken them. Students were also required to zoom in on satellite imagery and find out what difficulties their traveler would encounter in terms of terrain – how many rivers, mountain ranges, or deserts stood in their way. By thinking deeply about the practical realities that underlay medieval travel literature, students could better imagine the human cost of travel in the Middle Ages.

We were fortunate to have an on-campus GIS specialist, Jim Ciarrocca, who led two in-class workshops on GIS in the fourth and fifth weeks of class. Specifically, he trained the class how to use ArcGIS, a fee-based program that provides the infrastructure to create and share GIS maps and data online. In addition to the two in-class workshops for students to learn the software and begin to build their own maps and routes, Ciarrocca and his student assistants held open hours offering help several days a week in the GIS lab. The advantages of ArcGIS for my class in particular were the diversity of base maps, the ready availability of GIS data from other projects, and the ability to create story maps, which combine map data with narrative text and multimedia. For institutions without access to this level of support, much of this assignment can be done for free in Google Maps as well.

These maps led to insights of both practical and political natures. One of the most surprising challenges for students was locating points in the first place. Many city names have changed since these narratives were written, and smaller settlements, especially in Europe, have often disappeared completely. Uncovering the modern names or locations for these points can require extensive research. For several students, simply learning that the major medieval centers of trade and culture were located in the Middle East and North Africa was a revelation. Students
also learned about political and social realities by considering the rationale of various routes: one student could not understand why Ibn Fadlan took what looked like an out-of-the-way route between Baghdad and Bulghar, but when she placed it on a map (Fig. 1), she found that his trip around the Caspian Sea allowed him both to avoid crossing a particularly steep mountain range and to remain in Muslim-controlled territory, rather than venturing forth into what might be less welcoming areas.

Here are some examples of these maps: in Figure 1, a student mapped Ibn Fadlan’s journey into Russia, and in Figure 2, another chose to illustrate Felix Fabri’s journey from Germany to Venice and thence to the Holy Land. This particular student paid close attention to mountain passes to imagine how Fabri could really have moved from place to place, rather than taking the easy (and inaccurate) assumption of straight paths.

Fig. 1 – Ibn Fadlan’s journey from Baghdad to Bulghar16
As students worked on their physical maps, they also read about the history of points along their routes. Every other week, students researched and wrote about one location from their travel narratives. This assignment had two parts: first, to summarize the practical details of the traveler’s journey (how many days they stayed in one place, how many miles they traveled from their previous destination, where they stayed, what they ate, etc.), and second, to analyze the intercultural implications of their descriptions of various places. Each summary was then linked to a specific point on the GIS story map. In this way, students digitally experienced a medieval traveler’s journey as they read the written accounts of the routes taken.

This assignment required literary analysis, historical research, and deductive reasoning skills. Most medieval travelers related very little about the practical details of their journeys, so students had to use modern maps and historical data about how much distance could be traveled
in a day to determine the length and difficulty of each leg of the trip. Historical research was necessary to contextualize each traveler’s experience because the political and cultural situations of each stop greatly affected the traveler’s freedom of movement, interaction with the local peoples, and practice of religion. By combining these skills in a single assignment, students could consider simultaneously both the practical and conceptual issues of travel in the medieval world.

As an example of the practical concerns at hand, consider the voyage of Margery Kempe. As many medieval authors, Kempe gives few details about the timing of her travels, but by combining ArcGIS’s ability to measure the distance between points with data about historical sailing conditions, students could estimate how long her journey would have taken. One student reasoned that Kempe would have spent somewhere between 11 and 27 days on the pilgrim ship from Venice to Jerusalem, depending on how favorable her sailing conditions were. This approximation makes it much easier to compare Kempe’s journey to Felix Fabri’s trip in 1483, for which he gives exact dates: Fabri spent 29 days at sea, including overnight stops in ports, 19 of those days at sail. Since Fabri provides far more practical details about the food, money, and clothing he required for his trip to the Holy Land, the student could then work backward to determine what supplies Kempe would have needed -- and therefore, just how generous the other travelers were who helped supply her (and how greedy the priest was who, according to Kempe, stole her bedsheets). Looking at modern maps also added a layer of realism to what might otherwise be an entirely abstract idea: the physical geography between points. A student working on Felix Fabri did not understand why he recorded that it took four days to travel by horse 40 miles from Feltre to Kuntersweg, when a walking horse might reasonably be expected to go
twice as fast, until the map showed her the minor inconvenience of the Swiss Alps directly in his path.

On a conceptual level, guided by class reading and discussion, students were especially quick to note how authors ascribed meaning to cultural and racial difference. Of particular note was Felix Fabri’s clear pre-nationalist bias, as he denigrated anything and anyone Italian as intrinsically inferior to their German equivalents. One student noted that Fabri’s nationalist bent colors even his description of the natural landscape, as he ascribes the change from what he sees as favorable to unfavorable travel conditions between Germany and Italy as confirmation of the inherent superiority of the “German race” over the Italians.19 In contrast, Ibn Fadlan divides the world not by racial or national lines, at least not as we understand them today, but instead by religion, assigning value to different groups based on how similar their belief structures are to Islam. *The Book of John Mandeville* does the same with Christianity, as it describes each group of people in terms of its differences from common Christian practices.

In a more positive comparison, Marco Polo heaps praise upon the court of the Great Khan, especially its religious tolerance of Christians, and Margery Kempe describes the Muslim inhabitants of the Holy Land in glowing terms, especially compared to the hostility of her fellow Christian pilgrims.20 One student noted, however, that rather than indicate any true religious tolerance, Kempe’s praise served primarily to condemn her fellow Christians, seeing Muslims not as individual people worthy of respect but as object lessons to prove a point. Kempe’s admiration for her Muslim guide therefore says more about Kempe’s own traveling companions than about those people she encounters.

These kinds of conversations allowed students to see the ways in which travelers used their meetings with other peoples alternately to define and criticize their own places in the world.
When Kempe insists that her Muslim guide treats her with special love and care, she marks those qualities as the standards by which her own society should be judged, and she criticizes her fellow Christians for failing to measure up – not to Muslim standards, but to Christian ones. Likewise, when Marco Polo describes Eastern women as obedient, silent, and sexually submissive, he reveals more about his own culture’s fantasies about the ideal woman than he does about the culture he is ostensibly trying to represent (although these descriptions and others like it have had long-lasting consequences in constructing racial prejudice in the West). Why can’t Christian women, he asks by comparison, obey and be silent? Each experience that travelers see as strange marks its opposite as what they believe to be normal, and foreign practices they admire serve to condemn their own societies for not accomplishing the same thing.

**Teaching with Medieval Maps**

Finally, in the last third of the class, we turned from modern mapping technology to maps a medieval traveler might actually have seen. These maps, often illustrated with fantastic beasts, mythical places, and unknown lands, owe more to cultural conceptions about cosmography than to geographic accuracy. As a final exercise, each student chose a medieval map and transferred their traveler's journey to it as accurately as possible, and then wrote an analysis of the two together. By comparing modern and medieval maps, students combined practical consideration of the journey with conceptual and metaphorical discussions about how medieval travelers understood the world through which they journeyed.

Most college students in the US are accustomed to thinking of the world with north pointing up, placing North America, Europe, and large parts of Asia in the upper half. This view of the globe is so normalized, in fact, that it is often a surprise for them to realize that this choice of orientation is neither natural nor neutral, but instead inscribes a particular worldview.
Likewise, medieval maps represented a specific way of thinking about the world and how its various parts related to each other. Medieval Christian maps most often were oriented with East at the top, towards the imagined location of the Garden of Eden, and placed Jerusalem at the very center of the world. This orientation marginalized locations in Western Europe that my students had been accustomed to thinking of as central, especially major European cities like London, Paris, or Rome, and highlighted the conceptual importance of the Holy Land. In contrast, Muslim maps often placed south at the top of the map, reflecting the belief that the tribes of Gog and Magog, who lived in the north, would come from below to start the apocalypse. These simple yet fundamental changes in orientation, then, pointed to major shifts in worldview.

The most exciting revelations about the diverse beliefs and practices of the Middle Ages stemmed from analyses of these medieval maps. Before students could make their maps, however, they had to decide which medieval map to work with. Each student chose a map based on research from a list that I provided, and then wrote a short paper explaining why that particular map suited their traveler best. For example, in Figure 3, one student rendered the travels of Ibn Fadlan on the Tabula Rogeriana, a 12th-century Muslim map that orients south at the top. She observed that the south-up orientation makes it appear as if Ibn Fadlan is traveling to the very edge of the world, dropping down to the dangerous lands where the tribes of Gog and Magog were supposed to live. This fear of traveling closer and closer to the tribes that would one day bring on the apocalypse colors all of Ibn Fadlan’s interactions with the people he meets, especially as he observes that the extremely short days and long nights make it nearly impossible to pray in the ways that his religion demands. In her final paper, she postulates that geography and climate had as much to do with Ibn Fadlan’s distaste for Viking culture as any of his observations on their habits.
Another student mapped the journey of Margery Kempe from England to Jerusalem on one of the few world maps that actually included England – the 13th century Psalter World Map found in Add MS 28681 in the British Library (see Figure 4). She observes that the medieval understanding of the T-O shaped world with Jerusalem like a bulls-eye at the center transforms Kempe’s journey from a vaguely south-west diagonal into “an ascent towards the walled heart of the world.” This rendering of geography reimagines Kempe’s pilgrimage as a literal ascent from the liminal, unimportant, and sinful England to the holy and central Jerusalem, mirroring Kempe’s own understanding of her spiritual transformation as a result of her journey.
Fig. 4 – The journey of Margery Kempe on the Psalter World Map
As we can see in Figure 4, in addition to conceptualizing space, these maps also often included fantastic and mythical creatures along the borders, especially in the East and South. In class, we discussed at length how the non-human species depicted in eastern and southern countries on these kinds of European maps contributed to the exoticization and dehumanization of peoples in Asia and Africa. John Mandeville, the invented persona of a writer who did not actually travel, freely mixes real and imaginary groups of people, writing about races that have one giant foot, heads beneath their shoulders, or the heads of dogs in addition to real groups in China or India. In every case, however, he ascribed value to each group based on how close its own religious beliefs were to Christianity. This particular worldview, that encompassed the entire world in terms of approximations of Christianity, worked to assimilate all space as Christian space and, in effect, categorized all people in terms of how easy it would be to convert them to Christianity. In the last week of class, students were shocked to see how influential Mandeville’s assumptions became in the colonization and forced conversion of the peoples in the Americas because colonizers like Christopher Columbus carried *The Book of John Mandeville* with them.²⁴ This final point drove home the fact that travel literature, far from just entertaining readers back home with tales of distant lands and foreign peoples, has real-world consequences for how groups of people interact. We feel the effects of those medieval travel descriptions even today.

**Conclusion**

By reading these texts and experiencing life as a medieval traveler, students can clearly see that the allegedly racially pure, exclusively Christian European past has always been a fiction. The study of the Middle Ages is inherently a global one, in which cultures traded, made
war or alliances, intermarried, and sent religious emissaries. The Middle Ages was also, like
today, a time greatly concerned with issues of race, religion, and group identity.

When Marco Polo categorized Asian cultures based on whether they burned their dead,
he was using a convenient shorthand to make a religious and cultural distinction – Catholics,
who believed in bodily resurrection, did not burn their dead; therefore a culture that did
represented a shocking break from his ideas of the normal. His wonder and alarm help
demonstrate how travel narratives offer opportunities both to make the foreign more familiar and
to re-entrench the differences between the two, dividing the world more clearly into us-versus-
them. Foreigners are only foreign, the texts remind us, as long as they remain distinctly “other.”

Moreover, reading medieval travel narratives drives home the lesson that modern ideas
about race and nation are, in fact, only constructs – not inevitabilities, and not natural in any
sense of the word. Ibn Fadlan divided the world into groups based on religion, not race – or, in
fact, a race that was mutable, defined by theories of belief rather than biological phenotypes.
Felix Fabri assumed that countries were defined not by borders or history, but by language – as
the Italian town of Trent became more inhabited by German-speaking people, it became, to his
eyes, German. Ibn Battutah cared far more about whether the peoples in the vast lands through
which he traveled practiced Islam correctly than about the color of anyone’s skin. None of these
travelers, except perhaps Fabri, assumed that their primary identity lay with any idea of “nation.”

If teaching travel narratives accomplished nothing else, the mere act of reading the
experiences of medieval travelers actively works against the popular narrative of the narrow,
homogenous, and stagnant medieval past. No one reading Marco Polo’s admiration of the Great
Khan, Margery Kempe’s praise for the Muslim men guiding her through the Holy Land, or Ibn
Fadlan’s mixed fascination and horror at the Vikings’ lack of cleanliness can reasonably
continue to cling to the idea that the medieval world involved no intercultural or interracial communication, respect, or intermixing. By bringing these diverse texts to life through GIS and medieval mapping, students can experience the medieval debates about religion, race, and proto-national identity in an entirely new way. The real consequences of travel, interactions with other cultures, and conceptualizations of the world are thrown into high relief, shedding light not just on the past, but on the present as well.

Appendix

Abbreviated Schedule of Assignments and Readings

Week One - Travel Narratives as a Genre
Week Two - Ibn Fadlan; Practicalities of Medieval Travel
Week Three – Abu Hamid Al-Gharnati; Medieval Maps; students choose their traveler
Week Four - ArcGIS training; blog post due
Week Five - ArcGIS training; Marco Polo
Week Six - Marco Polo; blog post due
Week Seven - Ibn Battutah; modern ArcGIS map due
Week Eight - Ibn Battutah; blog post due
Week Nine - Benjamin of Tudela; paper about choice of medieval map due
Week Ten - The Book of Margery Kempe; blog post due
Week Eleven - The Wanderings of Felix Fabri
Week Twelve - The Book of John Mandeville; blog post due
Week Thirteen - The Book of John Mandeville; medieval map due
Week Fourteen - Conclusion; final paper rough draft due
Finals Week – final paper due


4 Since Charlottesville, medievalists across the world have worked to create online resources for teachers, collecting texts, images, histories, and scholarly works that clearly demonstrate the diverse history of the Middle Ages. While putting together this class, I was greatly assisted by the TEAMS special issue on teaching race and racism in the medieval classroom. Carol L. Robinson, “FEATURED LESSON RESOURCE PAGE: Race, Racism and the Middle Ages,” TEAMS: Teaching Association for Medieval Studies, March 30, 2018, https://teams-medieval.org/?page_id=76.


See the appendix for an abbreviated schedule of readings and assignments.

All examples of student work are included with student permission. They can be found at Chelsea Skalak, *Mapping the Global Middle Ages*, accessed July 25, 2018, http://blogs.dickinson.edu/mapping-the-middle-ages/.


Fabri, *The Book of the Wanderings of Felix Fabri (circa 1480-1483 A.D.)*.


**Works Cited**


Ulaby, Neda. “Scholars Say White Supremacists Chanting ‘Deus Vult’ Got History Wrong.”