

TEAMS 2019 Essay Prize Winner

"Mapping the Middle Ages"

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Introduction

This two-part lesson was designed for an introductory-level History course—"Europe in the World, 1000-1500" (HIST 212)—which I teach at SUNY Geneseo, a public liberal arts college in western New York. In all of my teaching, I emphasize the active nature of a historian: that thinking historically requires the mastery and use of skills and an awareness of context, not rote learning. I therefore designed this lesson to harness students' curiosity about the Middle Ages while building their facility with analyzing primary sources and developing their geographical knowledge. It uses cartographic sources—maps and globes—to help students better conceive of the horizons of the medieval world, and to better understand how the differences between a map sketched on parchment and one generated by a GPS system come down to more than simple matters of technological capability.

I last taught "Europe in the World, 1000-1500" as a fifteen-week course during the Spring 2019 semester. I met for 75 minutes twice a week with the course's thirty-eight students. History majors comprised approximately half the class, as it fulfils in part the Geneseo History department's breadth requirement for a course in European history; the rest were non-majors who took the course as an elective. The majority of students were first-years or sophomores. While many had at least a vague pre-existing interest in the Middle Ages—or at least in medievalist pop culture such as *Game of Thrones* or *Assassins' Creed*—they often had little experience in engaging in independent historical analysis. The lesson provides a framework within which students engage with medieval history as an active practice and:

- practice analyzing visual/textual primary sources
- acquire a firmer grasp of what can be encompassed by the term “the medieval world”
- learn to distinguish between medieval and modern views of the world
- assess changes over time in medieval world views
- develop a familiarity with digital research tools via an engagement with mapping technologies and online archives.

The lesson plan meets Geneseo's expectation that 200-level History courses develop students' ability to "connect course content to a global context" and to identify interconnections "in multiple historical contexts, global systems, and power relations." For most of my students, the lesson also allows them to build on knowledge they will have developed in accordance with New York State social studies standards, which for example mandate that Grade 9 students "explore shifts in the Western European Medieval view of itself."¹ It is aimed at lower-level undergraduate students, but is flexible enough that it could easily scale down to middle- and high-school level.

Lesson Plan

Lesson One

The first lesson focuses on developing students' skills in identifying and contextualizing a primary source: in this instance, a map. Medieval *mappae mundi* (world maps) varied in size from simple marginal sketches to elaborate wall maps. Although most show geographical features such as mountains, rivers, and seas, and built structures such as castles or cities, they were generally not intended for practical navigation purposes. They could bring together historical, religious, mythological, even botanical and zoological knowledge, in ways not often

found on modern maps. These varied elements make these maps invaluable sources for reconstructing the worldview of medieval people—what they thought mattered most in the world around them.

In preparation for the class, I posted a link to the Virtual Mappa (VM) project

(<https://sims2.digitalmappa.org/36>) on the course website.² VM provides open access to digitized versions of approximately a dozen medieval maps, each accompanied by an explanatory essay.

Most importantly, each map is encoded so that clicking on any of the outlined features or blocks of text produces a pop-up that contains both a transcription of the Latin text and a translation into modern English. VM therefore makes these *mappa mundi* fully accessible to non-specialists with an ease not previously possible. At the beginning of the class session, I placed students in groups of 3-4, and assigned each group one of the VM *mappa mundi*. By asking students to independently analyze the maps in groups, I was requiring them to be active as historians and not simply depend on my interpretation of the source for them. Before setting them to work, I also reminded them that by this point in the semester, they had acquired a basic familiarity with some of the major political entities of later medieval Europe, and with the long-distance trade networks that spanned AfroEurasia. I encouraged them to draw on this prior knowledge as they examined their assigned map. I then circulated throughout the room so that students could ask clarifying questions if they encountered an issue, but mostly I was able to stand back and observe students interacting with their peers, sometimes answering their own questions before I could and coming up with their own interpretations of the source. The following maps are particularly recommended for this exercise:

- Cotton World Map (11th century)
- Psalter World Map (13th century)

- Hereford World Map (13th century)³
- Higden Map (14th century)

Each group was asked to assess their assigned map by asking the following questions:

- What can you find out about who might have made this object, where, and when?
- How is the map oriented and arranged?
- What places/geographical features did you expect to see? Why? Do all of them appear on the map?
- Does the map contain any places/geographical features which you did not expect to see? Why/why not?
- Does the map depict any non-geographical features such as people, animals, or structures? What are they? Why do you think they were included?
- What connections can you make between the map and any people, places, events, or themes which we have discussed so far this semester?

The students were given 40 minutes to answer the questions as fully as possible. They could jot their group answers down on notepaper or compile information in a shared Google Doc. (If they chose the latter, I asked them to share the document with me so that I could follow along virtually and offer advice via the comment feature.) At the end of the allotted time, we reconvened as a group and discussed their findings, writing common answers up on the whiteboard. The students' observations varied according to ability level. Some of the less adept students were able to make only some basic observations: that Jerusalem was shown at or near the center of all the maps, or that the Red Sea tended to be depicted as literally red. However, a stronger student picked up that on the fourteenth-century Higden Map, the important trading city of Alexandria, Egypt, was shown as a large walled town—yet was depicted in a much less

elaborate and colorful manner than was Babylon. (This was because of the latter city's prominence in Christian scripture). The student did not yet have the knowledge to make the leap as to why this distinction was made, but when I drew together the students' separate observations, I was able to prompt some good discussion on the centrality of faith to life in the Middle Ages. For the last five minutes of the class, students engaged in a short writing exercise, in which I asked them to reflect on what aspect of the map they thought was most useful for historians. This gave students the opportunity to show me their assessment of the source—even if they were one of the less vocal members of the class—while helping to solidify for them the idea of a map as a valuable historical source.

Lesson Two

This second part of the lesson hones students' ability to engage in "retrieval practice." Retrieval practice is a strategy which emphasizes the deliberate recall of information in order to examine what we know. While hardly a new approach, recent research by neuroscientists has demonstrated that retrieval practice is the best study method for cementing knowledge in long-term memory.⁴ By revisiting the topic of medieval maps at a later point in the semester, students were able to reinforce connections between various topics which we had studied that semester: faith, trade, the Crusades, the history of the book, the beginnings of European colonial expansion, and more. The class session focused on the exploration of a number of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century globes. In preparation, I posted links on the course website to several such globes which have been digitized in three-dimensional format by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (National Library of France) and are now hosted on Gallica, its digital repository:⁵

- Martin Behaim, the *Erdapfel* ("Earth Apple"), 1492. (Facsimile.)

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55008737g>. The oldest-surviving terrestrial globe, it represents the world as Europeans understood it on the eve of Columbus' first voyage to the Americas.

- Martin Waldseemüller (attributed), "Green Globe," ca. 1506.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55008738x>. This is the first known globe to use the name "America" for those continents.

- "Wood Globe," 1535. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55008740r>. This globe still depicts the Americas and Asia as forming one contiguous land mass.

- "Rouen Globe," mid-16th century. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55008742n>.

Note that the west coast of the Americas is still vaguely rendered.

Students were again placed in groups of 3-4 and assigned one of the digitized globes to study for a period of 30 minutes. They were asked to assess it as a historical source using the following questions as guides:

- What can you find out about who might have made this object, where, and when?
- How is the globe oriented and arranged?
- What places/geographical features did you expect to see? Why? Do all of them appear on the globe?
- Does the globe contain any places/geographical features which you did not expect to see? Why/why not?
- Does the globe depict any non-geographical features such as people, animals, or structures? What are they? Why do you think they were included?

- In what ways is this globe similar to the *mappa mundi* which you analyzed earlier this semester? In what ways is it different?
- What connections can you make between the globe and any people, places, events, or themes which we have discussed so far this semester?

I again circulated throughout the room so that students could ask clarifying questions if they encountered an issue. At the end of the 30-minute session, we had a 5-10 minute share-out in which students volunteered some of the major thematic connections they had made, and differences they had noted between the *mappa mundi* and the globe. We wrote these up on the classroom whiteboard. The students who had been assigned the *Erdapfel* observed how neatly it refutes the popular idea that Europeans thought the world was flat before the voyages of Christopher Columbus; those who had worked with the other globes noted how European knowledge of the world had improved in fits and starts over several decades. I then asked each group to create a shared GoogleDoc. I instructed the students to draw on the knowledge they had acquired through their analysis of their assigned globe to write a joint statement which:

- provided a description of the globe for someone who had never seen it
- argued for the globe's importance as a historical artefact
- mentioned at least two specific ways in which a historian could use the globe as a source
- made at least one specific connection between the globe and a person/event/theme which we had previously studied that semester

The purpose of this assignment is for students to demonstrate the increased clarity and sophistication of their source analysis, and their ability to place a source in its broader historical context. The students had the remainder of the class session in which to fulfil this assignment.

Most groups wrote approximately 1-1.5 pages. They then shared the GoogleDoc with me so that I could assess their statement.

Suggested Assessment Rubric

I graded the short free-writing exercise from the first lesson according to the Check/Check Plus/Check Minus system. I assessed the written assignment from the second lesson using a more fleshed-out rubric based on the Check/Check Plus/Check Minus. As a 30-point assignment (out of a maximum of 1000 available for the course), this is a relatively low-stakes way for students to get feedback on their analysis of primary sources.

Criterion	✓+ (10)	✓ (8)	✓- (6)
Use of evidence	Provides clear and thorough description of object; includes appropriately selected evidence to establish its historical importance	Provides a solid description of the object; may not fully establish the historical importance of the object and/or omits a major piece of evidence	Unclear or confusing description of the object; lack of evidence to support its historical importance
Organization	Ideas arranged with clear purpose; advanced sense of organization	Ideas are arranged in a general manner; overall purpose not necessarily clear	Haphazard; attempt at organization confusing
Mechanics	Uses mechanics of writing correctly and effectively; few or no errors	Demonstrates awareness but not mastery of mechanics of writing; some errors which do not impede understanding	Does not use demonstrate awareness of mechanics of writing; many errors which do impede understanding

Conclusion

This exercise was a useful reference point throughout the rest of the semester, as students worked towards the completion of a major assignment that required the in-depth analysis of a primary source text. It provided a touchstone for some students who considered themselves visual learners, and allowed me to remind all of them that an argument was something that could be constructed in images as well as through text. In future iterations of this exercise, I may experiment with spreading it out over three class sessions to allow students who are less comfortable with technology to have more time to gain confidence with using the VM environment. This may also be advisable for those using a version of this assignment at the middle- or high-school level, where perhaps it might equally be advisable to choose one map to explore as a class. As a whole I have found this to be a successful assignment. By asking students to engage with mapping technologies on a spectrum from medieval to modern, I help students to better equip themselves to understand that the Middle Ages unfolded in a space bounded by horizons both physical and mental.

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¹ New York State Education Department, "K-12 Social Studies Framework," <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/k-12-social-studies-framework>; SUNY Geneseo, "Geneseo Learning Outcomes for Baccalaureate Education," <https://www.geneseo.edu/provost/globe-geneseo-learning-outcomes-baccalaureate-education>.

² Virtual Mappa is produced by the University of Wisconsin-Madison with the collaboration of the British Library and the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Full details on how to use the Virtual Mappa environment are provided in a "How To" Guide on the site. See also Cat Crossley, "The Virtual Mappa Project and DM: Online Editions of Medieval Maps and More," British Library Maps and Views Blog. <https://blogs.bl.uk/magnificentmaps/2018/06/virtual-mappa-project.html>.

³ Note that due to particularly large file size, the Hereford Map may take a few minutes to fully load even on a very fast connection.

⁴ See for instance, Jennifer Gonzalez, "Retrieval Practice: The Most Powerful Learning Strategy You're Not Using", *The Cult of Pedagogy*, September 24, 2017. <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/retrieval-practice/>

⁵ The pages may load showing 2D photos. If so, click on the 'View in 3D' symbol in the left-hand sidebar. Depending on the speed of your connection, it may take a minute for the 3D globe to load. Use the 'Play' button to make the globe spin on its vertical axis; use the touchscreen/click-and-drag function of the cursor to move the globe in other directions.

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