

Faculty Interview

*jur* gets a lesson in medieval history from Dr. Thomas Hahn, English, and Dr. Richard Kaeuper, History

**jur:** Why study medieval history?

**Kaeuper:** Well, we study medieval history because it’s the origins of our own society, in many ways that are obvious but also some that are not. We have a world of universities, government, law, vernacular languages, etc. It is our parent civilization, and yet it’s also a world that’s so very different from us. It’s a hierarchical world, a world that’s religious in ways that the modern world is not—you can see what connects us and what forms us, and yet still step outside when looking at the medieval.

I think that’s a very important point— one of the benefits of studying any old period is that it gets us outside of the present. The danger is that we might begin to think that the world has always been the way it is, and that the way we do things is natural and inevitable. I fear that modern students think that democracy is the natural form of government and that if you remove the restraints from people they will come to democracy, naturally. I think that’s as far from the truth as anything I can imagine, and I say that not because I’m opposed to democracy but because I value it so highly. It’s something that’s so carefully crafted, so getting back to a time that people naturally thought not in democratic terms but hierarchic terms I think is tremendously important.

**Hahn:** So at the risk of there seeming to be a party line I have to agree precisely; my answer would have been framed in exactly the same way. It does seem to me that we oscillate between these notions of same and other. As we look at the past and we look at its surviving artifacts, one of the things we need to do first is get some sense of how these things made sense to their original audiences and producers on their own terms, but also how we are motivated by our own interests. It is those interests that we can best relate to in the 21st century, and that relation allows us to make sense of that past. It seems to me that we’re continually in this dynamic process of both trying to see the past and its artifacts, its productions, and the experience of the people living then in its own terms, but also to see them in terms that serve our interests right now.

I think the one disciplinary difference that I’m struck by is the strong emphasis on institutional and public connections that Dick made. One of the things that separates English from history is that I would probably end up talking about things much more in terms of a focused study on particular artifacts, stories, texts, circulations of manuscripts, whatever. And of course I want to see them in some larger sort of systems, but I think that it’s a kind of macro-micro vision where literary studies is much more focused on particular subjects while historical study on larger patterns and institutions.

**jur:** What are your personal attractions to the material?

**Kaeuper:** I guess I was attracted to the color and romance of the medieval past. It’s what attracts so many of us—it is other, and bright, and pre-Raphaelite, and all these other things. But as a historian, to underscore Tom’s point, I always think that in studying the Middle Ages, one can see a civilization put together, and it’s almost in slow motion. The modern world goes so fast, but time on a medieval scale is more relaxed. Sometimes you come upon something remarkable and think “Ohhhh, look at this,” in a positive way, although also sometimes in a negative way. I mentioned the latter because I don’t romanticize the Middle Ages at all. I don’t wish to. Sometimes students say to me, “You should see this film, it’s really dirty.” They don’t mean scandalous, they mean it’s full of dirt that would imply realism, because they know I don’t have a romantic view of the Middle Ages anymore.

We can see aspects of the world we live in really taking form. You can watch the constituent elements of the civilization, and then you can watch what kinds of choices and sacrifices are made, what kinds of problems emerge, and what kinds of oppressions take place in order to have the evolution that goes on. Anyone who takes my courses knows that I think we’ve got our historiography quite wrong, that the really fruitful and creatively building time in European history is just as likely to be found in the 12th century as in any other century with names like Renaissance attached to it.

I like these people, I wish I could get closer to them, and that is one reason that I turn to a lot of literary sources because we lack the memoirs and day-to-day kind of evidences from the Middle Ages that historians of later periods can rely on.

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A medieval artist’s depiction of siege warefare, common during the Crusades.
Hahn: In some crude paraphrase of Marx, “People choose their careers, but not in circumstances they have any control over.” I think I have a sort historical curiosity that stemmed from a lot of language study in Catholic school. I think that there was also a strong emphasis on continuity there, and the more I became interested in the Middle Ages the more I began to think about differences between then and now.

I think the thing that continues to attract me to it most, however, is that Medieval Studies, in a way that stands out from other disciplines, has been interdisciplinary. This has been true for the last 75 years or more since the founding of the Medieval Academy. In this way you can take a look at something that survives from the Middle Ages and approach it through a whole series of interdisciplinary perspectives, looking at not only its connection to religion or art, but its economic situation, what kinds of material conditions motivated its production, and so on.

I think we study these things because it is so difficult to recapture a past that is so removed from us, and particularly in the Middle Ages because there are so relatively few sources—we have to scramble to be able to make sense of the past. It’s almost as if people who work in more recent periods are overwhelmed by the amount of data they have to look through in archives or elsewhere. Now, I don’t want to say that we are so lucky not to have more information; I would indeed like to have more information, but not having it is actually one of the things that produces a very inventive response to the medieval past. In many ways, I think that as my own history as a teacher and a scholar at Rochester has unfolded, it’s been a history of finding more and more ways of how to inventively think about the past.

Jur: What kind of questions about medieval material do you most frequently deal with?

Kaeuper: Well, I’m always trying to understand how this society works, and in that I follow in what Tom just said about the past being forever closed: it’s like putting together a puzzle with lots of pieces missing, and there’s a fascinating element of detective work in that, sometimes at very precise levels with very particular questions and at sometimes very general levels with very large questions.

I started out asking how medieval British government financed itself and basically went from there. I was surprised in that work to find out how small the escorts were for such large sums of money, which led me to ask, ‘What’s the status of public order?’ My assumption was that it must be pretty good because the king is shipping around king’s ransoms with very small forces, but there were a lot of things I didn’t take into consideration, and my assumption ended up being wrong. In the search for an understanding of public order, I discovered that public order was in crisis in the later Middle Ages, a subject that Tom and I have taught together in classes that we’ve done together.

From there I thought, “Well, where’s the crisis of public order in France? Is it something structural, is it peculiar to England?” That took me across the channel, and I started asking comparative English-French questions, a thing that’s very hard to get medievalists to do, I think. It’s unfortunate that there’s not been a lot of comparative work because suddenly things snap into focus when you get two societies as parallel as England and France in the later Middle Ages. They shared two high cultural languages, Latin and French, and though the French of England was going off in a different direction, the societies are linked by marriage, trade law, war, etc. Those connections, however, haven’t been closely studied, for the most part.

In studying public order I got interested in chivalry, which I believe was a very mixed force in public order, and then looking at chivalry led me to questions of popular religion, because “Can one imagine Western chivalry without the infusion of religious ideas, regardless of what happens to them once they arrive?” is a very interesting question.

So there’s been this trajectory of one question leading to another, and I think that’s one of the wonderful things about our work - you just keep asking questions. A former neighbor met me in a supermarket a few years ago and said “Hi, I bet you’re still doing medieval history,” and I said “Yep, I haven’t solved it all yet.” In one sense, I think the questions are sort of eternal, over and over again, I don’t think we always have to ask questions, or formally do, but as Tom said, finding new ways to come after questions. I always tell students “You’ve found a good topic when you ask ‘What’s the basic book on this,’ and you discover there isn’t a basic book on it, and it’s a question that seems so important that you wonder where it is.”

Hahn: I’d start with the contention that knowledge is social, that it’s something that inhabits living bodies, and from there one of the questions then becomes how to do justice to the lives of the people of the past. But we must recognize that we have to sustain a dialogue with our own students, with our colleagues, and some wider world that we reach through scholarly publication. It seems to me that one of the things that one continuously negotiates, at least in literary studies, is this sense that one wants to do justice to those lives, and to the documents that express the experiences of the people of the past, and yet at the same time recognize that the questions that we ask really arise out of the kinds of dialogues we’re having right now, not only with our students but also with our colleagues, both present and in a wider world.

I’ve just recently finished an essay on Arthurian romance that took me much longer than it ever should have. One of the difficulties with the subject is that it’s just so big – Arthurian romance is everywhere. But also, part of the purpose of the essay was to talk about what’s “new” in Arthurian romance in the last quarter century, and I wound up talking about this notion of “Arthurian,” that is, the way in which earlier scholarship imagines that there’s almost a literary DNA, Arthurness, as it were, and that you can find this in some particular

The funeral of Raymond Diocries of Notre-Dame de Paris.
sources. However, it seems to me that this notion has been displaced by some much more historically acute sense that stories of Arthur are produced with these particular interests of constituencies in mind. So, what ends up coming across in Arthurian romance is not a portrayal of a previous mythos of Arthur but rather a reinvention of it; each reader who comes to the text, including readers of the 21st century, are in this process of reinventing. The sense of reading these texts against the experiences of generations of readers right down to our own time seems to be one of the things that I find myself thinking about and wanting to write about pretty continuously.

**jur:** In writing on medieval topics, what sort of sources make up the bulk of your research?

**Kaeuper:** Well, the sources of course depend on the questions asked, and I’m always urging students to remember that questions that aren’t asked cannot get answered. I’m overly fond of quoting Frederick William Maitland, the great Victorian legal scholar who said, “If we can only ask the right questions, we shall have done something toward a good end.” So, you get your questions lined up, then you go for the sources. Some questions can’t be answered, and students find that very discouraging. “But I want to know this,” they’ll say; well, it’s very hard to know that because you probably can’t get the evidence for it.

I began by using government records, parchment records from the public records office, but more recently I have turned to medieval literature as a historian, and it’s been the link between the Tom’s and my work, because as I’ve said, we lack other kinds of sources. I think that these texts were written by writers for patrons with points of view, and trying to understand what those are is another important thing to do. I think there’s spin in this, there’s ideology, there’s valorization and demonization going on, so I teach courses, as does Tom, in which we try to get back to the issues of real people in the Middle Ages by using these texts. A student said something to me once that I liked very much: “You don’t want to look at texts, you want to look through them.” Guilty as charged – I always imagine these texts as great sheets of glass, and that I’m looking back through them; there are real people back there, and sometimes they’re doing things that we’re troubled by. But I want to look through these texts to the world that produced them.

I think one of my beacons as a historian, however, is to hew to evidence in the most precise way possible. That’s why I’m less enthused about heavy theorizing because I think there’s a danger of it turning out to be painting by numbers – you can decide what you’re going to find, and that danger is always present in scholarship. The riposte to that, of course, is that you’re fooling yourself if you think you’re objective, but I think we can try very hard; I don’t want to throw out the baby with the bathwater, because while I think that texts have spin and are representative of points of view, that’s really what I’m after in a text. I’ve started into more than one subject with one point of view and the evidence has turned me to another point of view, and so I don’t think that my views are just pure subjectivity, and that’s probably true of most views. I think there is an irreducible element of close scrutiny of evidence that may change your mind, and without that, I don’t see how we’re writing anything other than propaganda, if we’re not insofar as we are able as human beings responding to real evidence and looking at it carefully and as objectively as possible. A student said to me once, “Look, I know what’s right, I’ll just select the evidence to support what I know is right.” I said, “What would you say to me if a Nazi propagandist said that to you?” That’s crude, but it’s clear that the evidence changes with the questions asked, and I hope that we can keep asking fresh questions, or freshly asked questions, and looking at new evidence.

**Hahn:** One of the projects I’m working on right now is the first book in English on the New World. This is a very small book, published in Antwerp by a minor printer, one that no sane literary scholar would consider to be a literary text. It reminds me when I attend to such things as this book that it is quite a scramble for us people who deal with earlier fields to find ways to make these texts interesting; it’s not simply to decipher or read through those texts themselves in terms of the interests that motivate them, but also to decide how to try to engage people who are alive right now in my classes and through my writing with these things that might otherwise seem uninteresting.

Part of what’s interesting about this is to try to figure the ways in which this text feeds into the kinds of literary and cultural traditions among the things that interest me. One of those ways is in the sense of continuity, that is, we’ve got here a text that’s primarily about novelty - the book’s title is “Of the New Lands” - but it also includes several other medieval texts. So, to try to make sense out of what a text published around 1510 is doing in relation to these medieval legendary stories and a mass-produced audience reading in English while having been published in Antwerp, all of these things come into play in trying to offer a historical and cultural explanation of why this book is important. Part of what interests me here is to look through these texts at the motives that drive their publication, to look at their originals, and to look at other languages that this printer was working from.

Even in deciding to publish such a book, there’s obviously a kind of spin on the printer’s side: he’s thinking that there’s an audience in England, he’s going to set this in type (a very labor-intensive thing to do), he’s going to produce X number of copies, and then he’s going to take them over there and try to sell them. In any case, it seems to me that his business of attempting to both decipher spin but also to put some spin on this in terms of making this an interesting text is also worth talking about. For example, when one embarks on a project like this, to think of this in the crudest possible materialist 21st century terms, you have to convince a publisher that this is worth doing. Just saying, “Hey, I found this old book which nobody seems to be interested in, would you like to publish it?” will usually get an answer of “No.” So, we need to find out what kinds of perspectives we can bring to it that actually suggest why it was important in its own time and why it remains important to think about it now; for example, in terms of this book, how does it respond to (and challenge) current global studies arguments? Those are the things that we are continuously thinking about, and thinking about in terms of our daily classes: that is, how do you walk into a classroom and convince the people sitting there that they need to take their precious time and energy and devote it to the things we’re obsessed with and care about?