

Mirabile dictu!

The Newsletter of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) at the University of Colorado



Marketing the Middle Ages

by Professor Scott G. Bruce

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With the new semester comes the relentless onslaught of departmental and college meetings. One the most persistent concerns voiced in these gatherings is the alarming decline in majors and enrollments across the humanities. On university campuses across the country, students are opting out of History, Classics, Philosophy, English, and

other important disciplines as majors, choosing instead seemingly more practical degrees in Business, Engineering, and the sciences. Should medieval historians market their courses in new ways to make them more appealing and relevant to undergraduates? Read on, gentle reader.

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Speaker Profile: Professor Alexa Sand (Utah State)

Professor Sand will give a public lecture on a late medieval "Mirror of Kings."

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CU Alum Professor Richard Payne Publishes First Book

A State of Mixture examines the delicate balance of interfaith Iran in late antiquity.

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A New Book by Professor Valerio Ferme (Italian)

Female story-telling and the banishment of melancholy in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

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**SPEAKER PROFILE:
ALEXA SAND**

Alexa Sand is Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art + Design at Utah State University. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1999. Dr. Sand's research focuses on the intersection of religion, language, and the visual arts in late medieval France, Italy, and England. Her articles have appeared in *Art Bulletin*, *Gesta*, and *Word & Image*. Her first book, *Vision, Devotion, and Self-Representation in Late Medieval Art*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2014. This book focuses on one of the most attractive yet poorly under-stood features of late medieval manuscript illumination: the portrait of the book owner at prayer with the pages of her own prayer-book.

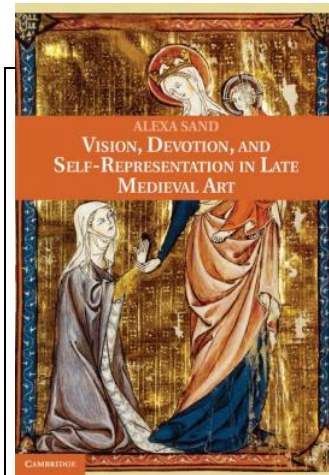
A specialist in late medieval manuscripts, Alexa Sand is Associate Professor in the Department of Art + Design at Utah State University.

Professor Alexa Sand subscribes strongly to the notion that everyone should have the opportunity to engage in hands-on, original research in the humanities at some point in their educational career. Her own research illuminates the rewards of this "hands-on" approach. With the support of an ACLS Charles Ryskamp Fellowship, Sands is finishing a second book project that investigates the artistic, social, religious, and political dimensions of an immensely popular medieval book: *La Somme le roi*, a late medieval manual of Christian morality for the laity with sections devoted to catechism, the vices, the virtues, and other fundamentals of the faith and its practice. It began its life in 1279, called into being by King Philip III of France, whose Dominican confessor, Laurent d'Orleans

"compiled and put it together," in the words of the colophon that frequently accompanies the text. From the outset, *La Somme le roi* was also an illustrated text. Its pictures, as much as its words, constituted a fundamental part of the book's meaning. Its pictorial tradition, like its verbal tradition, embraces both time-honored and newly-crafted material, and both were conceived in the spirit of bricolage in which the creative, complex, and often surprising refashioning of older material results in a multi-modal text against which the book user can sharpen the tools of spiritual perception. The popularity of *La Somme le roi*, attested by over 100 manuscripts and half a dozen early printed editions, indicates its importance as a source for understanding the way in which lay people came to acquire a degree of religious literacy.

On 24 September 2015, Alexa Sand will deliver a public lecture entitled "Moral Illumination: La Somme le Roi and Courtly Culture, 1279-1464."

On Thursday September 24 at 5pm, CMEMS is proud to present Professor Alexa Sand (Art + Design, Utah State University), who will give a public lecture entitled "Moral Illumination: La Somme le Roi and Courtly Culture, 1279-1464." The event will take place in HUMN 1B90. Refreshments will be served. The talk will last 45 minutes, to be followed by a Q&A with Professor Sand. Undergraduate and graduate students are most welcome to attend.



CU Classics Alumnus Professor Richard Payne Publishes his First Book on Late Antique Iran



Classics alumnus Professor Richard Payne has had an exciting career since graduating from CU over a decade ago. Richard is an historian of the Iranian world in late antiquity, ca. 200-800 CE. After completing his doctoral degree in history at Princeton University, he has won research appointments in Germany and England and held his first tenure-track position in the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In 2013, he moved to Chicago, where he is currently Neubauer Family Assistant Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago.

Richard's research focuses primarily on the dynamics of Iranian imperialism, specifically how the Iranian (or Sasanian) Empire successfully integrated socially, culturally, and geographically disparate populations from Arabia to Afghanistan into enduring political networks and institutions. He has authored numerous scholarly articles, including "Cosmology and the Expansion of the Iranian Empire, 502-628 CE," published in the prestigious journal *Past & Present*. He is also co-editor of *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*.

Richard's new book, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, was published this month by the University of California Press. Richard argues that Christian communities flourished during late antiquity in a Zoroastrian political system, known as the Iranian Empire. Whereas previous studies have regarded Christians as marginal, insular, and often persecuted participants in this empire, Richard demonstrates their integration into elite networks, their adoption of Iranian political practices and imaginaries, and their participation in imperial institutions. The rise of Christianity in Iran depended, Richard shows, on the Zoroastrian theory and practice of hierarchical, differentiated inclusion, according to which Christians, Jews, and others occupied legitimate places in Iranian political culture in positions subordinate to the imperial religion. Richard's book helps to explain the endurance of a culturally diverse empire across four centuries.



A STATE OF MIXTURE

Christians, Zoroastrians,
and Iranian Political Culture
in Late Antiquity

RICHARD E. PAYNE



A STATE OF MIXTURE

(continued from p. 1)

Taking Cues from Classics

At CU Boulder, the Department of History has taken its cues from the Department of Classics when it comes to marketing our lower-division courses to undergraduates who have yet to declare their major. Once upon a time, Classics taught core courses with titles like "Introduction to Classical Studies." Enrollment increased considerably when the titles of these courses were changed to "Trash and Treasure, Temples and Tombs" and "Modern Issues, Ancient Times." The beauty of the first title is not just its alliteration. For a generation raised on Indiana Jones movies, any title including the words "treasure" and "tombs" is bound to attract attention. The second title is equally appealing because it carries the promise of relevance to contemporary society and implies that modern issues have roots in the distant past, which make Greek and Roman culture worth studying. Kudos to Classics for striking gold with these

imaginative and provocative new titles!

Can we do the same in the Department of History? Our equivalent of Classical Studies is, of course, that fossil called Western Civilization. This title is so deeply problematic it is surprising that we have waited so long to change it. But change it to what? What is the medieval equivalent to the "treasure and tombs" of the classicists?

After long deliberation among the team of professors and lecturers of premodern history who teach the course on a regular basis, we have replaced "Western Civilization I" with "Greeks, Romans, Kings and Crusaders: European History to 1600." What this title lacks in elegance, it makes up for in accuracy. Similarly, "Western Civilization II" has become "Empire, Revolution and Global War: European History since 1600." Since both of these courses are being offered with their new titles for the first time this semester, it remains to be seen whether this new marketing ploy will bring more

students into the classroom and recruit more History majors.

A Success Story

My fellow medievalist Carrie Beneš, an Italianist who teaches in the Department of History at the New College of Florida, shared a story of successful marketing. Back in 2007, she taught a course entitled "Culture and Society in Late Medieval Italy." Only six students enrolled. This was so demoralizing that she put the course on the shelf until this year, when she decided to offer it again with a brilliant new title: "Death, Hell, and Capitalism: Medieval Italy from Dante to Petrarch." The preregistration meeting for this course drew over 100 students (15% of the student body). The course is over-enrolled and, according to Carrie, "a roaring success." We should all be so lucky! But it is clear from this example that broad terms like "culture and society" do not speak to undergraduates as clearly as "death, hell, and capitalism," words that raise the question of human motivation and evoke emotions that many of us have



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in common. Tapping into the fund of human experience seems to be the key.

Gimmicks or Values?

The marketing of upper-division courses follows a similar methodology: the replacement of words that are unintelligible or repellent to undergraduates (“intellectual,” “constitutional,” etc.) and replacing them with words that speak to more directly to the concerns that we all share. It is tempting to call every upper-division survey on the Middle Ages “A Game of Thrones,” start with an obligatory lecture on dragons, and watch the seats fill, but this kind of gimmick will ring hollow in the short run and debase the currency of what we offer in long run. For our history courses to be successful, we have to put the gimmicks behind us and market the true value of what we are teaching: the humanities, that is, exposure to a full range of past human emotions and experience that enriches and informs us as human beings in the present. The inestimable value of university degrees in the humanities is the

cultivation of the one skill that STEM and other degrees simply do not teach: empathy.

A useful juxtaposition has been floating around social media this week in the wake of the experience of Ahmed Mohamed: a STEM degree teaches you how to build a clock; a Humanities degree teaches you how to build a society where people like Ahmed are not persecuted for building clocks. Amen.

Looking Ahead to October

October brings a distinguished visiting speaker from Jerusalem: Professor Elisheva Baumgarten, who will give a public lecture on October 8. Later in the month (October 22-24), our CMEMS-sponsored conference on *Religion and (the Master) Narrative* will take place on the CU Boulder campus. The entire conference is free and open to the public. We look forward to seeing you all there!

Servus.

About the Director: Professor Scott G. Bruce, Department of History



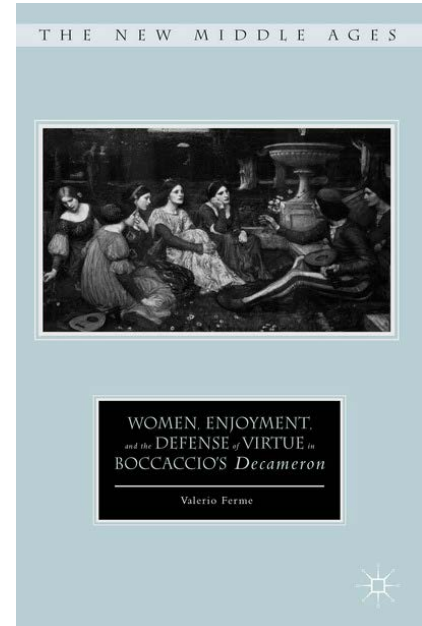
Scott G. Bruce earned his B.A. in History and Latin *summa cum laude* (1994) at York University in Toronto, Canada. He pursued his M.A. (1996) and Ph.D. (2000) in History at Princeton University, where he concentrated on topics in religion and culture in the early Middle Ages and wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Professor Giles Constable.

A specialist on the history of the abbey of Cluny, SGB has published widely on many aspects of medieval monastic culture and literature. He also serves as an editor of *The Medieval Review* (TMR) and plays an active role in the Medieval Academy of America (MAA). For more information, including a complete list of publications, please visit: www.colorado.academia.edu/ScottBruce

Valerio Ferme (Professor of Italian & Associate Dean for the Arts & Humanities) Publishes Book on Boccaccio

Valerio Ferme, Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature and Associate Dean for the Arts and Humanities at CU Boulder, has published a new book on Boccaccio entitled *Women, Enjoyment, and the Defense of Virtue in Boccaccio's Decameron* (2015) in Palgrave Macmillan's series The New Middle Ages. From the premise that Boccaccio writes the *Decameron* as a go-between to aid women in love to endure the melancholy that love causes them, this book analyzes how, in the parallel world of the narration, Boccaccio's female characters employ storytelling as the "honest" entertainment with which to banish the melancholy engendered by the Black Death, even as it helps them avoid the shameful behavior embraced by other Florentine women. This "honest" defense of their honor is challenged by the sexually explicit stories narrated by their male companions, who gradually suggest the desire to move from words to action in the overarching narrative. Through an analysis of the dynamics between the women who rule most of the first half of the *Decameron* and their male counterparts, the book provides novel ways in which to read Boccaccio's masterpiece within the context of late medieval society.

Congratulations to Valerio Ferme on this new book!



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'THE MOUSE THAT MADE LATIN COOL!'

IMAGE SOURCES:

The cover image shows a sculpted head of Christ (15th-16th cent.) made in the Netherlands and now housed at the Met in New York.

The marginalia on p. 3 is probably the earliest depiction of monkeys playing baseball with the Eucharist. It appears in a 14th century book of hours, now Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 6.



Postscriptum: In next month's newsletter, we will announce a new CMEMS primary school outreach project that involves a Roman family from Vindolanda and a mouse named Minimus. Stay tuned for all of the details!

