

Negotiating Identities

Expression and Representation in the Christian-Jewish-Muslim Mediterranean



NEH Summer Institute for College and University Teachers

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Our Institute involves a rethinking of the history of the later Middle Ages (c. 1000–1500) through the optic of the Mediterranean, emphasizing questions of religious and ethnic pluralisms, cultural contact, hybridity, transculturation, and the negotiation of identities. Rather seeing the Mediterranean merely as the arena of conflict and contact between monolithically-conceived cultures (e.g. Muslim, Christian, Jewish, European, African, Middle Eastern), it takes as its starting point the dynamics and structures common to each of these as they engaged with one another. As a region whose history of connectivity can be documented over at least two and a half millennia, the Mediterranean has recently become the object of innovative scholarship in various disciplines that shifts attention from the *internal* structure and development of discrete entities (political states, ethnic or religious groups, cultural traditions) to a study of *interconnectedness* and dynamics of interaction. The emphasis on contact and circulation invites a nuanced reconsideration of recent (and not-so-recent) conceptualizations of modes of interaction between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish societies. Paradoxically, the medieval Mediterranean, often cast as a site of the origin of Christian-Muslim hostility in the form of the Crusade, has also been idealized as the site of “*convivencia*” – the harmonious coexistence of Christian, Islamic, and Judaic cultures. The facility with which ideas, cultural practices, and technologies traversed the Mediterranean is testament to the commonalities underlying the formal divisions between ethnic and religious groups. At the crossroads of northern European, African, and Middle Eastern cultures, linked (via long-distance trade) to South and East Asian, African and northern European, the Mediterranean played a key role in the

emergence of the modern West in ways Mediterranean Studies has recently begun to document.

In the last decade, Mediterranean Studies has emerged as an important interdisciplinary teaching and research field, as attested by the proliferation of Mediterranean Studies groups, conferences, institutes, journals, and publications series, as well as the growing number of academic positions in history, art history, literature, and philosophy being framed in terms of the pre-modern Mediterranean, both in the US and abroad. Catlos and Kinoshita—both in their individual research and especially through their multiple collaborative projects—have systematically sought to develop the potential of Mediterranean Studies as a forum for making visible the connections, commonalities, and conflicts that otherwise fall between the cracks of disciplinary boundaries, and have become leaders in this new and exciting, interdisciplinary field.

In this vision, Mediterranean Studies is *not* limited to the study of those times and places that produced articulations (geographical, historiographical, cartographical) of the region as a whole. Nor is the Mediterranean treated as an area with fixed geographical boundaries, or as a unified, much less essentialized, culture. Rather, we take the Mediterranean as an area whose distinctive geography of fragmented, and therefore interdependent micro-regions has produced a pattern of ever-shifting interconnections accommodating populations of mixed religion, ethnicity, language, and much else. While sometimes leading to political and ideological polarization, these kaleidoscopic variations also lend themselves to what Catlos has described as “mutual intelligibility” across some of the categories central to more traditional medieval historiographies. This helps to account for the currents of innovation and synthesis that transformed medieval Europe: the adoption of Greek and Arabo-Islamic science and medicine, the monotheistic re-configuration of Aristotelian philosophy, the translation and adaptation of literary works and styles, and the ease with which Muslim and Christian powers could engage with each other and incorporate ethnic and religious out-groups (notably Jews) in their societies and institutions. Mediterranean Studies thus encourages the exploration of contact and exchange not only in political, economic, and religious spheres (diplomacy, long-distance trade, shared currents of legalism or mysticism across confessional lines), but also in literary, artistic, and cultural ones (the translation of texts, circulation of decorative arts, and transmission of styles and ideas).

This is a perspective that over the last ten years has captured the imagination of scholars, both in their research and their teaching. However, even for today’s medievalists—increasingly trained in comparative work—working across national and confessional traditions remains challenging. This Institute provides participants with the conceptual and methodological tools to engage effectively with Mediterranean Studies as a frame for both research and teaching, and introduces them to practical work being carried out in a number of disciplines, represented in the research of our diverse faculty.

Detailed program information will be available on this site on December 1.

Aims

- To encourage understanding of cultural interaction and creation in the multi-confessional Medieval Mediterranean
- To encourage interdisciplinary research and teaching that crosses and challenges national and ecumenical divisions.
- To give college and university professors and highly-qualified graduate students the opportunity to study and to work collaboratively under leading scholars in a range of fields.
- To Give participants the opportunity to use the archive, libraries and facilities available in Barcelona.

About the Institute

- Organized by the Mediterranean Seminar, a forum for promoting research and teaching in the emerging discipline of Mediterranean Studies.
- Our third NEH Summer Institute on Mediterranean Studies to be held in Barcelona (click for detailed information and reviews of our [2008](#), [2010](#), and [2012](#) Institutes.)
- Once again, our faculty includes some of the most creative and exciting scholars in the field.
- Includes a varied program of presentations, seminars, collaborative and technical workshops, field trips, *après*-Institute, and plenty of time for independent reading and research.