

AHRC Grant success: Medievalists Network

Posted on Thursday 1st November 2012

Naomi Standen (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/history/standen-naomi.aspx>) (Birmingham), Catherine Holmes (Oxford) and Scott Ashley (Newcastle) are now co-operating to create a UK-based network of medievalists with interests in the global. This network will include scholars working on Eurasia, the Americas and Africa.

There are quite evidently different ways to determine 'what was 'global' about the medieval period. One approach is to draw on perspectives offered by other historical timeframes in order to identify medieval phases in phenomena such as empires, state formation, long-distance trading contacts, trans-continental migration, the exchange of ideas, and the development of regional political cultures. But, it is quite possible that the unquestioning application of theories and models from other contexts serves neither global nor medieval history well. Instead, the more pressing task is to analyse the global as it was experienced in the Middle Ages itself: we need to point up parallels and connections with other periods when appropriate, but also to identify differences and suggest alternative interpretative paradigms.

In its next phase the project will tackle questions of definition, particularly the thorny issue of periodisation. The 'Middle Ages' does not happen in the same place at the same time. It may not even be identified as a period at all in some places. Are these insuperable problems? The project will also interrogate some of the basic assumptions associated with the pre-modern global, above all bipolar competition within Eurasia (e.g. Christendom versus Islam; China versus the West). It will investigate the suggestion that a more creative way of discovering the nature and extent of the global in the middle ages is to consider how different communities communicated with each other over space and time.

Looking for a global middle ages which makes sense in its own terms is not ivory-tower purism. Instead by working out the scope, limits and nature of the global in the centuries between 600 and 1600, a period that was characterised by multiple centres, porous boundaries, and plural societies, we will be examining contexts that resonate in striking ways with an increasingly de-centred and interconnected twenty-first-century global community.