Arth 334/Hist 388
Early medieval art and culture
Autumn term 2013

TTh 10:30-11:45
Planetary Hall 212

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Description and goals
        This course offers a survey of
important artifacts, monuments, themes, and
developments in the art of early medieval
Western Europe from Constantine's Roman
empire of the fourth century to the empire
of Charlemagne in the ninth. Through careful consideration of objects and texts
we will explore the emergence of a distinctly medieval visual culture and its
relationship to the Roman past. Topics include the function of art and
architecture as a means of imperial self-representation among both Romans and
Franks, the troubled cultural exchange between eastern and western empires, the
rise of the cult of relics and its architectural legacy, and the production,
dissemination, and decoration of late ancient and medieval books.
By the end of the course students will be familiar with a range of
representative moments of early medieval visual culture, have a sense of the
context in which these works of art were produced, and how the distinctive
political and religious pressures of the moment shaped artistic production. In
addition, students will have developed a set of skills for reading medieval
images, allowing them to interact with the objects of this period with a new,
richer understanding of how such images work and communicate meaning.

Important enrollment information
  • Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class.
  • Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the
    Schedule of Classes. (Deadlines each semester are published in the
    Schedule of Classes available from the Registrar's Website
    registrar.gmu.edu.)
  • Last day to add: 9/3
  • Last day to drop with no tuition penalty: 9/3
  • Last day to drop with a 33% tuition penalty: 9/18
  • Last day to drop (67% tuition penalty: 9/27
  • After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires
    the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons.
  • Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See
    the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

Students with disabilities
If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations,
please see me and contact the Office of Disability Resources at 703.993.2474,
ods.gmu.edu. All academic accommodations must be arranged through ODS.

Honor code
  • George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of
    this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and
    integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited.
  • All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.
  • See http://oai.gmu.edu/honor-code/masons-honor-code/ for more detailed
    information.

Blackboard
For better or for worse blackboard plays an important role in this course as a repository for many of our readings and all of our graded assignments. Please ensure that you have access to our blackboard page: mymason.gmu.edu

Email
Please ensure that you have access to your GMU email account. I will occasionally communicate with the class via email, and the course email lists depend on your GMU mail account. NB: it is not uncommon for student mailboxes to fill up after a few terms on campus; please be sure there is plenty of free space in your inbox so my mail can get through to you.

Required book: Nees, Early Medieval Art (Oxford, 2002)

Recommended books: While not a hard and fast requirement, everyone would do well by reading a general account of the Early Middle Ages as we move through our material. Along these lines, I recommend either the first seven or so chapters of Norman Cantor, Civilization of the Middle Ages (cranky, opinionated, well-written and engaging) or the entirety of Chris Wickham, Inheritance of Rome (absolutely the best overall treatment of the period, without rival). Both of these may be had as inexpensive paperbacks from all the usual sources. Alternately, you can do nearly as well with the shorter treatment to be found in one of the general medieval textbooks. The relevant chapters of any of the following will do, and they're all in the library: Winks and Ruiz, Medieval Europe and the World; Rosenwein, Short History of the Middle Ages; RHC Davis, A History of Medieval Europe.

Artstor: Artstor is an online image database, with the teaching of art history as one of its primary missions. Much of our course material is drawn from Artstor. Each week I will post selected slides from the lectures to the images folder on our blackboard page for you to review. Thanks to Artstor's copyright provisions, these images will be available to you in .shw format, Artstor's proprietary presentation format. To view them, you'll have to create an Artstor account and download and install Artstor's Offline Image Viewer (=OIV). Full instructions for how to do this and view the images may be found in the images folder on our blackboard page.

Grading:
      two source assignments: 15% each
      museum project: 25%
      exhibition project: 45%

Source assignments: These are short (3-4pp) papers in which you discuss a medieval object in detail. Full instructions for each source assignment are found in our assignments folder on blackboard. NB: I've assigned three source assignments, but you need only write two. If you write all three, I'll count only your two best grades.

Museum project: We've an embarrassment of good early medieval art within short striking distance, and this project asks you to take advantage of it. This project may be fulfilled by a visit to the Dumbarton Oaks Museum, the National Gallery of Art, or the Walters Art Gallery. Full details and instructions in the assignments folder on blackboard.

Exhibition project: As the culmination of the course, this project asks you to create a virtual exhibition of early medieval art. You will gather together objects on a topic of your own devising, and what such a collection tells us about the period. Full details in the assignments folder on blackboard. NB: all topics for the exhibition project must be approved with me in advance, so start planning early.

Exercises, primary sources, and study guides: As you can see from the syllabus, we will make use of a variety of material outside of the textbook, and all of this material is located in the readings folder on blackboard. Please read medieval sources in translation and their associated study guides before you come to the class for which they are assigned. Occasionally I've included short exercises designed to help you come up to speed with a particular object or style of art. Please complete these exercises at home before you come to the class for which they are assigned; these exercises are not graded, but they are very helpful in introducing you to new departures in this class, and by doing them you will take away quite a bit more from the lecture in question.

Important dates:
F 9/13: source assignment 1 due at noon
F 10/11: source assignment 2 due at noon
F 11/15: museum project due
F 11/22: all topics for the exhibition projects must be approved no later than this date
F 12/6: source assignment 3 due at noon
Th 12/12: exhibition project due at noon

Medieval events at CUA
The Center for Medieval and Byzantine Studies at Catholic University in Washington DC maintains a strong and varied series of public lectures. As of this writing their autumn schedule is not yet online, but as it comes out I will keep the class posted of any events that look relevant to our topic. All the details, when available, will be posted at: http://mbs.cua.edu/

Medieval events at Dumbarton Oaks
The Dumbarton Oaks Museum and research library also runs a series of public events during the academic year, many of them on topics of interest to students in this class. Like CUA, however, the autumn schedule at Dumbarton Oaks isn't yet online. I'll keep you posted as information becomes available, and you can check too at: http://www.doaks.org/news. Remember too that the Dumbarton Oaks Museum fulfills one iteration of our museum project.

Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC:
Opening on October 6, this promises to be an important exhibition of the art of the eastern Roman Empire, much of it from our period. In addition to the exhibition, the Nation Gallery will host a series of related lectures. There is plenty here of interest to students in this class, and a visit to the exhibition will fulfill one option for our museum project. I will keep you all updated with full details on the exhibition, associated lectures, and this iteration of the museum project as we get closer to opening day (October 6, 2013). More detail at: nga.gov.