Medieval Civilization

COURSE CODE HUM2021



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GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Introduction

The era that we have come to know as the Middle Ages spans at least one thousand years. It would be impossible within the confines of this course to show you everything there is to know about this period. We will concentrate on some highlights of medieval culture, including literature, science, and philosophy, of the Latin West.

The expression 'Middle Ages' has quite a complicated history. The division Antiquity—Middle Ages—Modern Time was first applied to the history of Europe by Cellarius (Kristoph Keller), at the end of the seventeenth century. It has its origins in the view of the Italian Humanists, who regarded themselves as having reinvented the eternal aesthetic values of the classical Roman empire, and thus saw themselves as the heralds of the New Era. Since then, many labels have been attached to the Middle Ages, none of which, however, are tenable.

The only reason we should still employ the expression 'Middle Ages' is habit; it has simply become customary to identify the period roughly between 500 and 1500 as 'medieval'. Given the lack of a unifying principle to characterise the Middle Ages, it hardly makes sense to speak of 'medieval culture'; it is more appropriate to speak of a plurality of cultures in the Middle Ages.

Yet even though there is not one comprehensive way of characterising this (or indeed any) historical period, we can still identify specific currents throughout the Middle Ages of the Latin West. To begin with, one can hardly escape the influence of Christianity, which was to become the official religion of the Roman Empire, after Julian the Apostate in the 3rd Century of the Common Era had in vain attempted to restore pre-Christian values and beliefs. Again, it was owing to the institutions of Christianity like churches and monasteries that the intellectual heritage of Antiquity could be kept alive. However, in many areas of Europe paganism too was still abundant, and we can see evidence of both the intermingling of and clashes between Christianity and pagan religions throughout the centuries encompassing the Middle Ages.

This brings us to a second pair of developments in the Middle Ages, which could be subsumed under the notions of tradition and innovation. A revitalisation of culture could only get underway after a long period of struggle and conflict. For a long time there was no serious culture of learning to speak of throughout the western part of Europe. To start with, there was a lack of 'scholarly' reading material. After the fall of the Roman Empire it took centuries before medieval officials began to invest a lasting interest in education. As to philosophy, for instance, sources from Antiquity were first merely retrieved; but as time went by, they gradually started to serve as starting points for new developments.

Another form of tradition and innovation has to do with practices of magic and developments in the sciences. As we shall see, the sources of magic are very old, but we find novel approaches to and new uses of magic in the Middle Ages.

This course can only provide a tip of the iceberg. What we hope to achieve is that you start to understand the complexities of this period, and that you acquire an interest in its many forms of expression.

To grasp the ins and outs of medieval culture, you need to be aware of the historical context from which they arose. So a course on medieval civilization inevitably involves the study of historical backgrounds. For this purpose we have selected several sources for you, such as Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, Le Goff and Rosenheim. (Le Goff's work is dense, and takes a lot of time to read. Rosenheim is more easily accessible.) It is also recommended that you consult the Penguin atlas. You will be expected to discuss the main topic of each assignment with that information at hand.

2. Course objectives

The course aims to provide you with a basic knowledge of

- important aspects of the civilization in the European Middle Ages;
- the role and influence of Christianity in the Middle Ages;
- the intellectual history and development of Europe during the Middle Ages;
- literature of the Middle Ages.

3. Literature

The following titles are mandatory:

Martha L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Intellectual Western Tradition* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002; orig. 1997)

ISBN: 9780300078527

Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) ISBN: 9780521567626

Recommended literature includes:

Robert Bartlett (ed.), *The Medieval World Complete* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010 (or.

2001)

ISBN: 9780500283332

David Parlett, Selections from the Carmina Burana: A Verse Translation (London: Penguin

Group, 1986)

ISBN: 9780140444407

Barbara H. Rosenwein, A Short History of the Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto

Press, 2014, 4th ed.) ISBN: 9781442606111

A translation of *Beowulf* (see recommended titles in assignment 3).

4. Course requirements

In this course you are required to do a lot of reading. You need to study the texts carefully before every group meeting. After careful deliberation I have decided *not* to ask for summaries of the readings. **Please note that the primary literature (if any) listed in the assignments should be read in advance.**

A midterm exam (a take home paper, in the sixth week of the course) will cover the first part of the course. You will also have to write a final paper on a topic of your own choice (approx. 2000 words), which explores one aspect of medieval culture further. Topics for your paper could include

- * the discussion of a medieval piece of literature;
- * (the use of) magic and witchcraft in the Middle Ages;

- * the discussion of a specific issue in medieval speculative thought (ethics, the role of Christ in ethical theory, or another issue of your own choice);
 - * a topic from medieval natural science;
 - * Harry Potter and the Middle Ages (medievalism).

The final grade will be awarded as follows: exam (50%), final paper (50%). It is possible to compensate an insufficient grade with a sufficient grade on the other part of the exam, provided that the average of the two grades is sufficient.

5. Attendance and extra requirements

If you are unable to attend a meeting, please notify the tutor beforehand, or afterwards as soon as possible, indicating the reason why you are/were unable to attend. Students are required to attend a minimum of twelve of the fourteen meetings (viz. eleven tutorials plus three lectures). Students who have missed one meeting out of twelve may apply for one extra assignment according to UCM procedure. Students who have missed two meetings out of twelve may apply for two extra assignments according to UCM procedure. Students who have attended no more than nine meetings will fail the course altogether. Please note that the introductory lecture is mandatory.

6. Resit policy

Students whose final grade is below 5.5 are entitled to rewrite one of their papers.

7. Course Schedule

<u>Week 1</u> (05/02-09/02)

Lecture Spruyt: Course introduction

Session 1:

* prediscussion assignment 1

Session 2

- * final discussion assignment 1
- * prediscussion assignment 2

12/02-16/02 CARNIVAL BREAK

<u>Week 2</u> (19/02-23/02)

Lecture Kardaun: Beowulf

Session 3:

- * final discussion assignment 2
- * prediscussion assignment 3

Session 4:

- * final discussion assignment 3
- * prediscussion assignment 4

Week 3 (26/02-02/03)

Excursion Aachen (to be confirmed)¹

Session 5:

- * final discussion assignment 4
- * prediscussion assignment 5

Session 6:

- * final discussion assignment 5
- * prediscussion assignment 6

Week 4 (05/03-09/03)

Lecture Spruyt: Thomas Aquinas Excursion Aachen (to be confirmed)

Session 7

- * final discussion assignment 6
- * prediscussion assignment 7

Session 8

- * final discussion assignment 7
- * prediscussion assignment 8

Week 5 (12/03-16/03)

Midterm Exam: Take Home Paper

Session 9

- * final discussion assignment 8
- * prediscussion assignment 9

Week 6 (19/03-23/03)

Lecture Homburg: Alchemy (to be confirmed)

Session 10

- * final discussion assignment 9
- * prediscussion assignment 10

Session 11

* final discussion assignment 10

Week 7 (26/03-29/03)

Final exam: Take Home Paper

8. Course Coordinator

J. Spruyt, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Room B1.14, Grote Gracht 90-92, Maastricht tel: +31 (0)43 3883333

e-mail: joke.spruyt@maastrichtuniversity.nl

9. Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to Dr M. Kardaun for her contributions to this course book.

¹ An excursion to Aachen will be offered in week 3 or in week 4 of the course. More information will be given in due time.

ASSIGNMENTS

What is medieval history?

Unlike the ancients, the medievals have acquired quite a name for themselves. The expression 'typically medieval' is seen as quite precise and useful, for both admirers and critics alike. According to common opinion the medievals and the Middle Ages have specific characteristics that can be clearly recognised. Medieval people were superstitious, science was dead in the Middle Ages, the Church decreed that the earth was flat, to name but a few misconceptions.

Even historians of the Middle Ages until quite recently seemed to think that the label 'medieval' is informative in the sense that it should indicate a well-defined set of characteristics of a people's mind-set, rather than being a customary name for a historical period in a chronological sense only.

This first assignment could also be labelled 'the perils of periodization'. It asks you to consider the notion that a period in history could have intrinsic qualities, and that the name of the period could somehow be expressive of those qualities. What to make of the difference in England's and the continent's perspective on the Middle Ages? Again, if people say they study medieval history, what exactly does their study involve?



From Abélard's letters to Heloise

Literature:

Arnold 2008, Ch. 1 Eco 1986, pp. 61-85. Raedts 2010. De Rijk 1979.

Assignment 2 The Early Middle Ages I

Christian Doctrine and the Church Fathers

One of the landmarks always associated with the making of the Middle Ages was the reign of Constantine, the Emperor who was said to have made an end to the "crisis of the third century". After Constantine's conversion, it was only a matter of time that Christianity was to become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The transition to Christianity, however, was not a peaceful one. Not only were battles raging between competing religions, but even Christians themselves were hardly in agreement about the fundamentals of doctrine. Eventually the Church Fathers were the ones who came out victorious in the struggles over doctrinal issues.

By far the most important Church Father is St. Augustine, whose writings were to become a source of inspiration for centuries to come. His mother tried her best to raise him as a Christian, but initially without success. For quite a while Augustine was associated with a religious group called Manicheans. Later he found a more convincing solution to the problem of evil in Neo-Platonism. Ultimately, he embraced the doctrine of grace and was baptised by Saint Ambrose at the age of 33.



from left to right: Augustine and Jerome

Primary literature:

Augustine, Confessions, Bk I (English translations of the Confessiones are available online).

Secondary literature: Bartlett (ed.) 2001, Ch 1. Colish 2002, Chs 2-3 (Church Fathers). Rosenwein 2014, Ch. 1 (Transformation of the Roman Empire).

Further reading:

Le Goff 1990, Ch 1.

Assignment 3 The Early Middle Ages II

Beowulf

"Beowulf is to English what the Odyssey and the Iliad are to Greek language and literature. The oldest piece of vernacular literature of any substance not only in England but the whole of Europe, it breathes the true spirit of the northern Heroic Age. We cannot tell how it might have compared with similar epics composed at this time, since no others have survived. The various vicissitudes through which the medieval libraries passed meant that the preservation of the Beowulf-manuscript itself was a matter of mere chance. Because of changes in language, spelling and handwriting conventions, it would probably have ceased to be intelligible, or even legible, a mere two hundred years after it was written. But the poem was already several centuries old when this sole surviving copy was made, and close examination of the text suggests that it had a complex history of transmission, being copied several times in different parts of the country. Beowulf may have been very popular; certainly it was familiar enough for the name 'Grendel's pit' or 'pool' to have been used, presumably for fun, to describe boggy places in several parts of the country. And that the poem was highly regarded in literary circles is suggested by the fact that it seems to have been imitated in parts by certain writers of both poetry and prose."

(Michael Swanton, *Beowulf. Text & Facing Translation*. Edited with an introduction, notes and new prose translation (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.1.)

Chart the differences in plot between the motion picture and the original literary work. How is Grendel represented differently in the book and the film? Has the order of certain key events been changed? Do the differences give us a key to understanding the divide between ourselves and this dark witness of European ancestry? What does the epic clash between Beowulf and Grendel represent?

Primary literature (translations of *Beowulf*, all with thorough introductions):

Chickering 1977.

Heaney 2000.

Swanton 1997.

An earlier translation (1856), by John Leslie Hall, is available from the Project Gutenberg, at the following adddress:

http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm

Secondary literature:

Colish 2002, Ch. 8. Kardaun 2013. Tolkien 2006.

Motion picture:

Gunnarsson 2005, Beowulf and Grendel.

Assignment 4 Education in the Middle Ages I

Early Sources for Medieval Learning

In the early Middle Ages the sources for education were meagre. The Roman Empire was in the process of transformation, and throughout, the conditions for establishing a culture of learning were not favourable. One need only think of the disintegration of a strong central government, and the gradual dissolution of urban life, the kind of environment that had been essential to the thriving of the intellectual culture in previous times. This is the period that sees the fall of the Roman Empire and the widespread migration of many Germanic tribes. In a word, there was a lot going on.

Despite the difficulties, however, there were some early developments that were crucial for the re-emergence of education. There were people who valued the conservation of classical and/or Christian culture. The texts were produced by the so-called transmitters, and these were taught, studied, copied and commented on in monasteries.



Literature:

Bartlett (ed.) 2001, Ch. 1. Colish 2002, Ch. 4. Grant 1996, Ch. 1.

Cultural Revival: 11th-12th Centuries

Several developments throughout the 11th and 12th centuries were instrumental in the makings of a period of cultural flourishing. To begin with, gradually the invasions were coming to an end. The population of towns and cities was increasing. Overall the living conditions of their inhabitants improved, owing to the development of new agricultural techniques. The period also saw an increase in trade.

In the late eighth century, Charlemagne decreed that all monasteries and cathedrals were to support the learning of boys, hoping that this would help to provide well educated priests for the church. It took some time for this decree to come into effect. It was Pope Gregory VII (1079) who issued a papal decree for all monasteries and churches to establish schools in order to train priests. The best of these schools were found in cities like Paris, Rome, Toledo, and so on. The city of Paris in partricular, "a scholar's paradise", was to become the centre of the intellectual world by the turn of the thirteenth century.

The schools in Paris (and elsewhere) housed some very famous masters, who attracted students from all over Europe. One of these masters was the illustrious Pierre Abélard (1079-1142). Abélard is considered to be the most spectacular philosopher of twelfth-century Paris. In the history of Western thought he became famous for his solution to the so-called 'problem of universals'. His analysis can be characterised as conceptualist: it is human beings who form concepts of the things presented to them in the outside world, i.e., the concepts upon which of human logic and reasoning is founded.²

Primary literature:

Pierre Abélard, *Glossae super Porphyrium*, translation P.V. Spade, in Spade 1994, pp. 26-35 *The Love Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, edited by Ralph Fletcher Seymour (available online).

Literature:

Colish 2002, Chs 12-13. Grant 1996, Ch 2. Rosenwein 2014, 178-181. Weijers 2013, Ch. 4.

Further reading:

Le Goff 1990, Ch. 3.

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² The expression 'universal' in this connection stands for common nouns, which refer to genera and species (e.g. 'horse', 'tree', 'stone', and so on). A hotly debated issue in Abélard's times was the following: does the real world contain, besides individual substances, such as men and stones, universal things too, like horseness and stoneness, and so on? Abélard denies this. In his opinion, common nouns owe their signification not to the fact that they correspond with some sort of universal entity (a Platonic Form or an Aristotelian essence), but to a human being's ability to form concepts of those individual things.

Wandering Poets: the Carmina Burana

Educational developments in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which were mainly concentrated in the cathedral schools, resulted in an increasing interest in the study of the liberal arts (the *trivium*) not only as a tool for moral education and Bible study, but also as subjects worthy of investigation in their own right. Educators and writers sought to improve Latin composition in all literary genres, but they were also "open to," as Colish puts it, "an increasing two-way traffic between Latin and vernacular literature" (Colish 2002, p. 175).

These efforts also had an impact on cultural developments in a wider sense. The eleventh and twelfth centuries produced a wealth of literary genres informed by both the Latin and vernacular traditions. Most of you will have probably heard of the so called genre of courtly love literature, a genre which left a complex legacy. Yet alongside there existed other literary forms, which expressed an altogether different approach to life.

The *Carmina Burana*, made famous in Carl Orff's rendition, is a collection of songs written in a mixture of Latin, German and medieval French by the goliards, a group of poet-musicians, outsiders, steadfastly complaining against feudal bishops, church officials, misbehaving monks, uneducated clergy, and the cruelty of barons. Needless to say they were not looked upon favourably by the Church. They gradually disappeared from the scene and were replaced, in the thirteenth century, by the minstrels, the *jongleurs*, and by the troubadours and *trouvères*. (Heer 1993, p. 94).

Primary literature (translations of (selections) from the *Carmina Burana*, with introductions):

Marshall 2014 (orig. 2013).

Parlett 1986 (contains Carl Orff's selection in the Appendix 'Concert Arrangement'). Other texts and translations of Orff's selection are available online.

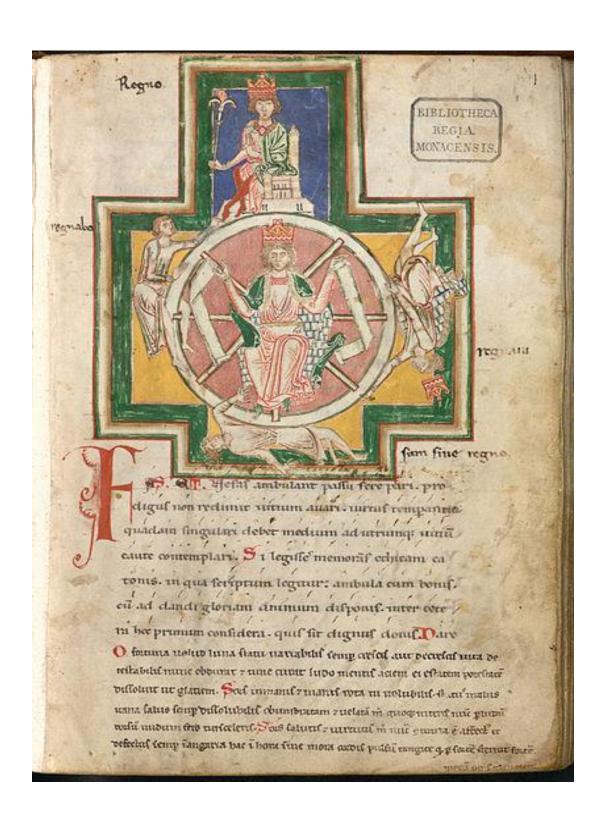
Literature:

Colish 2002, Chs. 13, 14.

Parlett 1986, pp. 9-50 (and selections of your choice).

Further reading:

Le Goff 1990, Ch. 3.



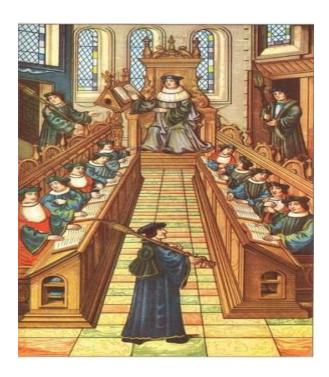
Bavarian State Library, Munich, Codex Buranus (Carmina Burana) Clm 4660; fol. 1r with the Wheel of Fortune

Assignment 7 Education in the Middle Ages II

The Medieval University

The expression *universitas* covered any kind of association or corporation that was frequently found in urban life, such as guilds of merchants or craftsmen or in fact any kind of community. At the end of the twelfth century there were the communities of masters (*universitas magistrorum*), of students (*universitas scholarium*) or of both (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*). Initially any kind of self-governing association including either students (as was the case in Italy) or master(s) and students was known by the name *universitas* (including single faculties like the faculty of arts, of medicine or of theology). The kind of university like the ones we know today were to become a *studium generale*. By 1200, the universities of Bologna, Paris and Oxford were flourishing as centres of learning.

While there were no preconditions or prerequisites, students (or more specifically, young boys) entering the universities would have to meet two important requirements in order to be part of the learning community. The most important function of a university was teaching. The universities all made use of specific teaching methods, but the faculties (arts, theology and medicine) each had their own material, i.e., sources specific to their domain of enquiry. Each faculty also had their own social and intellectual roles to play.



Literature:

Colish 2002, Ch 20. Grant 1996, Ch 3. Weijers 2013, Ch. 5. Weijers 2015, Ch. 1

Magic and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages

One of the fascinating features we tend to associate with the Middle Ages is that of magic and witchcraft. One need only be reminded of the immense popularity of the Harry Potter series, by some labelled as innocent entertainment for children on a par with tales like *Cinderella*, but on the other hand fiercely attacked by Christians as promoting a lifestyle dedicated to evil.

In the Middle Ages, magic was practised as a matter of course, so to speak, by many people of many different strata in society. Practices of magic included divination and necromancy. Later, under the influence of Arab culture, the occult sciences would come to include other practices, as well as natural forms of magic, such as alchemy and astrology.

Meticulous historical research (among others by Jeffrey Burton Russell) has provided evidence that the distinctions between magic, religion and science were not always clear cut. Christian religion obviously had its own elements of magical belief, but at the same time was (and still is) fiercely opposed to sorcery and witchcraft. Again, science in the Middle Ages too encouraged specific forms of magic.

So how then should we draw the lines between science, religion and magic in the Middle Ages? And what about witchcraft?



Literature:

Forshaw 18 Dec. 2014 Russell 1972, Ch. 10. Kieckhefer 2014, Chs 1, 4.

Speculative Thought in the Middle Ages

In this assignment we shall look at some interesting topics in medieval speculative thought. The twelfth century launched a new kind of logic, entitled *Logica modernorum*, or, logic of the moderns. On the one hand it was a continuation of Aristotelian logic, handed down via the works of Boethius (among others). But at the same time it developed new tools to interpret texts (both spoken and written), by paying close attention to the ways in which the use of an expression in varying contexts could influence the ways in which it should be interpreted.

Another important contribution in the twelfth century came from Pierre Abélard (whom we have already met in assignment 5). His ethics attracted quite some attention. One of the issues he addressed in his work *Ethica seu scito teipsum* ('Ethics or Know Thyself) was the precise definition of sin.

In the thirteenth century we find quite a different approach to ethics, as put forward by Thomas Aquinas, who is probably the most well-known philosopher-theologian of the Middle Ages. Undoubtedly his canonization (in 1323) has contributed to his fame.

In the *Summa contra gentiles* Aquinas proceeds to discuss the notion of *beatitudo*, 'felicity'. The basic assumption of his account is that God, the First Being, has created man and all other sublunary beings in an act of free will, from which he deduces that all creatures are subjected to the will, and hence are directed towards the highest end, God. Like Aristotle, Aquinas takes every form of life to be directed towards some end, and like Aristotle, he identifies the ultimate end of man with the 'good'. There is one problem, however. How is one to explain evil within such a framework? In Aquinas's opinion, evil results from bad judgement to the extent that reason can mistakenly consider something to be good when in fact it is not. For Aquinas then, the will is to be understood as completely dependent on reason.

Man cannot achieve ultimate happiness in this life, according to Aquinas, but only after his death. Remarkable, don't you think, the canonization of someone who argues that an action's moral worth is determined by the end of man in general: to become a full-grown man. Moreover, from a theological point of view it would hardly seem appropriate to consider an evil deed (sin) as a breach of reason, and then to add that sin, precisely in that capacity, does damage to the good life. Or is this not remarkable?

Primary literature:

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, translated by Vernon J. Bourke, in Jones *et. al.* (eds) 1977, pp. 128-133.

Literature:

Colish 2002, Chs 21-22.

Physical Science

Natural science in the Middle Ages (from the thirteenth century onwards) inherited its conceptual framework from Aristotle: four causes, change, motion, and so on were notions that stayed around for a very long time, until the Aristotelian framework was overthrown in the seventeenth century.

This is not to say, however, that the medievals took Aristotle's work for granted. For one thing, unlike Aristotle, they had to take into account the limitations of Aristotelian philosophy in the light of their Christian worldview. After the Condemnations in 1277, some aspects of Aristotelian philosophy underwent very serious scrutiny. Interestingly enough, the conflict between elements of Christian dogma and that of Aristotle, encouraged ingenious thought experiments that could have been devastating to Aristotle's teachings. Specific issues that came up in this connection included Aristotle's ontology understood in terms of the distinction between substance and accident, the existence of worlds beyond our own, and the question as to whether or not the world is eternal. But other aspects of Aristotle's philosophy, not directly related to theological issues, too came to be substantially modified, such as the explanation of motion.

According to historians of science, developments on the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a stepping stone towards the more revolutionary changes in scientific theories later on. Yet many medieval scholars never questioned Aristotle as such. Instead they considered themselves, rather humbly, as being in a more favourable position than Aristotle, having access to more material than he ever did. They were the dwarfs on the shoulders of the ancients, who looked upon their own work as an extension of what they had learnt from 'the Philosopher'.

Literature:

Bakker 2001. Colish 2002, Ch. 24. Grant 1996, Ch. 6. Thijssen 2013.

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Beowulf. A New Verse Translation. Bilingual Edition (New York: Norton, 2000)

Michael Swanton,

Beowulf. Text & Facing Translation. Edited with an introduction, notes and new prose translation (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997)

Christopher Tolkien,

Beowulf. A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell by J.R.R. Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 2014)

Carmina Burana

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The Carmina Burana: Songs from Benediktbeuern, 3rd Edition (CreateSpace, 2014)

David Parlett, Selections from the Carmina Burana: A Verse Translation (London: Penguin Group, 1986)

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http://www.davpar.eu/carmina/

Pierre Abélard

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The Love Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Edited by Ralph Fletcher Seymour

(Chicago: 1903) Available online:

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John H. Arnold,

What is Medieval History? (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008)

Paul J.J.M. Bakker,

'Aristotelian Metaphysics and Eucharist Theology: John Buridan and Marsilius of Inghen on the Ontological Status of Accidental Being', in J.H.M.M. Thijssen and Jack Zupko (eds.), *The Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy of John Buridan* (Leiden-Köln: Brill, 2001), pp. 247-264

Robert Bartlett (ed.), *The Medieval World Complete* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010; orig. 2001)

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'Beowulf and Archetypical Evil, in *Psyart: An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* (July 2013)

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'The Canonisation of the Medieval Past: England and the Continent Compared', in Willemien Otten, Arjo Vanderjagt and Hent de Vries (eds.), *How the West Was Won: Essays on Literary Imagination, The Canon and the Christian Middle Ages for Burcht Pranger*, in the series *Brill's Studies in Intellectual History*, vol.188 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 165-174

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