

Khans, Crusader Kings, and Vikings

Fall 2025 Syllabus Version 1.0

Course Information

Logistics

- **Instructor:** Dr. James Pickett
- **Course:** HIST 1000
- **Schedule:** Thurs 1-3:25 pm
- **Classroom:** 3700 Posvar
- **Email:** pickettj@pitt.edu
- **Office:** 3908 Posvar (in annex to the right of dept.)
- **Office Hours:** Tuesday 8:45—10:45 (email instructor if you wish to attend virtually: Zoom Link, 696-530-3747)
- **Course Policies:** <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/>

Overview

Historical Content

Late medieval Eastern Europe was awash with kingdoms and cultures all but lost to the popular imagination: German holy warriors, Norse merchant-kings, Muslim mystics, Jewish khans, and pagan gods. The history of this time and place did not leave much in the way of an integrated body of scholarship, which makes our task both more interesting and more challenging. Our approach will be “primary sources first”: we will read a wide variety of texts (in translation) left by the Rus, the Teutonic Order, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the nomads of the steppe and pragmatically draw upon what little scholarship exists to make sense of them as we proceed. Themes that will emerge from these texts are wide-ranging, from religion (conversion to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) to political (competing strategies of empire-building) to cultural (the transregional Byzantine “cosmopolis”). Over the course of the semester, students will develop an original research paper based on assigned primary source readings integrated into the body of scholarship we assembled together.

Approach

Baltic crusades? Italian city-states? Jewish khanates? And that’s before we even get to the *slightly* better-known stories of Poland-Lithuania and the Rus. Medieval Eastern Europe is not a coherent area study: it is an arena. There is no textbook or even cohesive body of scholarship that can guide us through this complexity. Thus, our approach in this Capstone seminar is going to work outward from the primary sources: we will (slowly and carefully) read a range of historical sources from a diverse set of cultural groups and attempt to answer the questions and challenges that emerge by assembling our own collective bibliography of secondary scholarship.

Grading & Assignments

Labor-based Contract Grading

This class will be subject to “*contract grading*”: at the beginning of the semester, you will choose a workload category corresponding to a letter grade at the end of the semester. Thus, rather than a grade exclusively

evaluating the *quality* of a uniform set of assignments, your grade will be primarily based on labor input. Within each grade category, pluses and minuses are subject to instructor discretion based on quality and effort.

You are all history majors and I take it for granted that, having gotten this far, you are motivated and fully capable of producing quality historical scholarship. There is no shame in selecting a lower workload for the semester: we all have competing priorities.

- ‘A’ grades:
 - Final research paper & final presentation
 - * Final paper is informed by comprehensive review of all relevant secondary scholarship.
 - Three mini-presentations
 - Three Perusall annotations per week
 - Two shared Zotero library contributions per thematic unit
 - No more than two absences
- ‘B’ grades:
 - Final research paper
 - * Final paper discusses the most important works of secondary scholarship.
 - Two mini-presentation
 - One Perusall annotation per week
 - One shared Zotero library contribution per thematic unit
 - No more than three absences
- ‘C’ grades:
 - Final research presentation (no paper)
 - No more than four absences

For general information about my grading “philosophy,” see <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/grading.html>

The Research Project

The centerpiece of a Capstone seminar is an independent research project. The starting point for each project will be the common primary source reading for one of the thematic units in the course. Think of this pre-selected reading as a “thread” you will pull on to unravel a much larger tapestry of related sources and secondary scholarship that will substantiate your research project. As you read the pre-selected source closely, what questions emerge? How have historians made sense of the source in the past? What are the major debates? What other primary sources help contextualize it? How does it relate to the other thematic units in the course?

Mini-Presentations

Students will sign up for mini-presentations throughout the semester. These are meant to be low-key and low-stress: no more than 10 minutes, visuals optional. These presentations come in several different flavors:

- *Historical narrative*: What, like, happened? Tell the story of the thematic unit: major turning points; key figures; cultural milestones. Pretend like you are a director adapting the material for a historical epic: try to make it exciting.
- *Historiography*: To the extent there is an identifiable historiography (many of these themes are niche at best), what are the major interpretive debates?
- *Primary sources*: What are some of the other available sources that help shed light on our common reading? Do they fall into different categories (e.g., by language or time period)? If you can get your hands on some of them, read a few quotes to offer the class texture.
- *Student-led reading*: Pick a section of the common reading *other* than the assigned sections and lead the class through it. Why did you pick this section? What questions does it raise? How does it relate to (or not) to the sections we read together?

Perusall

We will read sections of the assigned sources together using Perusall, software that allows us to comment on the texts together between classes.

Shared Zotero Library

Throughout the semester, we will be assembling a historiography for our subject matter together as a group. You are all responsible for contributing citations to the shared Zotero library (you can access the library, and request to join, from this link). These must be thoughtful, careful submissions:

- You may copy the citation information from an online repository (e.g., using the Zotero browser extension), but must double-check the bibliographic information for completeness and correctness.
- You must manually add at least three tags.
- You must add a note to the citation: 3-4 sentences informally describing what the work or source is, how you found it, and why it might be useful.

For more information about this assignment, and how to use Zotero, see: <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/zotero>

Course Schedule

*Assignments and readings are all due **before** the class date.*

Part I: The Last Pagans of Europe

Core Questions

Who were the Vikings in Eastern Europe? How did pre-Christian Slavs and Balts interact with the emerging Rus polity? What role did trade routes play in early medieval state formation?

Session 1 (August 28): Course Overview and Viking Sources Topics:

- Introductions & Course Overview
- Pre-Christian sources about the Vikings in Eastern Europe and Eurasia

In-Class Readings:

- Heimskringla, Ynglinga saga (excerpts)
- Ibn Fadlan on the Rus (excerpts)

Session 2 (September 4): Historical Narratives of the Rus Student Mini-Presentation: Historical narrative of the Rus

Readings:

- Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, eds., *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016-1471* (selected passages)

Part II: Byzantine Commonwealth

Core Questions

How did the conversion to Christianity transform the political and cultural landscape of the Eastern Slavs? What was the relationship between Byzantium and the emerging Rus principalities?

Session 3 (September 11): Historiography of the Rus Student Mini-Presentation: Historiography of the Rus

Student-Led Reading: Chronicle of Novgorod

Readings:

- Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, eds., *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016-1471* (selected passages)

Session 4 (September 18): Primary Sources of the Rus **Student Mini-Presentation:** Primary sources of the Rus

Student-Led Reading: Primary Chronicle

Readings:

- Chronicle of Novgorod (continued selections)

Part III: Crusader Kings - Baltic Germans and the Teutonic Order

Core Questions

How did the Northern Crusades reshape the Baltic region? What was the nature of German colonization and indigenous resistance? How did the Teutonic Order function as both religious and military organization?

Session 5 (September 25): The Teutonic Order's Historical Narrative **Student Mini-Presentation:** Historical narrative of the Teutonic Order

Readings:

- Nicolaus von Jeroschin, *The Chronicle of Prussia: A History of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, 1190-1331*, trans. Mary Fischer (opening chapters)

Session 6 (October 2): Baltic German Primary Sources **Student Mini-Presentation:** Primary sources of the Baltic Germans

Student-Led Reading: The Chronicle of Prussia

Readings:

- *Chronicle of Prussia* (continued selections)

*October 9: No class

Part IV: Black Sea - Medieval Italian Colonies

Core Questions

How did Italian maritime republics establish and maintain trading colonies in the Black Sea? What was daily life like in these multicultural commercial centers? How did these colonies interact with local populations and steppe nomads?

Session 7 (October 16): Black Sea Historical Narratives **Student Mini-Presentation:** Historical narrative of the Black Sea colonies

Readings:

- Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439* (selected passages)

Session 8 (October 23): Black Sea Primary Sources **Student Mini-Presentation:** Primary sources on the Black Sea

Readings:

- Giosafat Barbaro and Ambrogio Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia* (selected passages)
- Caffa plague petition (1346)

Part V: The Steppe Frontier - Jewish Khaganate and the Golden Horde

Core Questions

What was the extent and nature of the Khazar Khaganate? How did the Golden Horde govern its vast territories? What role did religious diversity play in these steppe empires?

Session 9 (October 30): The Khazar Khaganate **Student Mini-Presentation:** The Khazar Khaganate and Jewish conversion

Readings:

- The Schechter Letter (Khazar Correspondence)
- Excerpts from medieval Arabic sources on the Khazars

Session 10 (November 6): The Golden Horde **Student Mini-Presentation:** Mongol administration and culture

Readings:

- Ibn Battuta on Saray
- A. Zeki Velidi Togan and Evrim Binbaş, “Islamic Culture in the Khanate of Kazan” (excerpts)

Part VI: Early Modern Hegemony - The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Core Questions

How did the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth become the largest state in Europe? What was the nature of religious and ethnic diversity within the Commonwealth? How did the Cossack uprising change the balance of power in Eastern Europe?

Session 11 (November 13): Ruthenians and Religious Reform **Student Mini-Presentation:** Religious and cultural tensions in the Commonwealth

Readings:

- Meletij Smotryts kyï and David A. Frick, *Rus Restored: Selected Writings of Meletij Smotryc kyj, 1610-1630* (selected passages)

Session 12 (November 20): Cossack Uprising and Commonwealth Crisis **Student Mini-Presentation:** The Cossack wars and their aftermath

Readings:

- Bohdan A. Struminsky, materials on Cossacks and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (TBD)
- Contemporary accounts of the Khmelnytsky Uprising

Session 13 (December 4): Research Project Workshop **Topics:**

- Final project presentations
- Peer review and feedback
- Course synthesis and conclusions