MEDIEVAL BALTIMORE: USING AMERICAN MEDIEVALISM TO TEACH ABOUT THE EUROPEAN MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

Although the Middle Ages is present and alive in popular culture, for instance in movies or other forms of entertainment such as reenactments or computer games, teaching its history at college level still365 requires an exercise of the imagination. The research on history learning in American contexts clearly suggests it: we need to find ways to make the study of the medieval past more locally rooted in order to create a necessary level of familiarity; at the same time, we need to keep it intellectually engaging and open to visions of diversity. The article describes the experience of teaching undergraduate college students the history of Medieval Europe through individual research projects using the city of Baltimore (USA), its buildings, monuments, museums, and the professional medievalists working and residing in the area. The students collaborate in a web-based project with texts and multimedia objects, thus building a repository of the knowledge they have acquired through their research projects about the urban landscape of this American city and its social history, and about the Middle Ages as an object of history but also of cultivated memory, creative inspiration and esthetic apreciation in contemporary America.

Key Words

Medievalism, Teaching and Learning, Baltimore, Neo-Medieval Architecture, Museum Collections, Internet.

Capitalia Verba

Studia Medii Aevi, Artes ad docendum et discendum, "Civitas Magnae Domus" [=Baltimore], Neomediaevalis Architectura, Collectiones ad museum pertinentes, Retis Retium.

In truth, the term 'Middle Ages' has no more than a humble pedagogical function, as a debatable convenience for school curriculums, or as a label for erudite techniques whose scope is moreover ill-defined by the traditional dates

Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft.

To introduce college and university students to the study of the Middle Ages is a complex, uncertain task. One of the main difficulties derives perhaps from our scarce knowledge about how adult students today learn history. For instance, we do not know for certain which modes of communication are successful in exploring and building familiarity with the pre-modern past. Such familiarity can be defined as "an ability to recognize and situate a substantial common store of references about a consensually shared past".[1] Many scholars and teachers have expressed concerns about a current erosion of this familiarity. Without it, they argue, the difficulty of learning history increases at all levels of the curriculum, because a common ground and basic factual or chronological orientation are lacking.

As the events, protagonists and developments of the historical period we call the Middle Ages take the character of arcane lore for our college students, we see the very resilience of popular images of "the Middle Ages." Those images are present and persistent in today's changing public sphere. They are embodied in the world of digital fantasy games and entertainment, in movies,[2] as well as in popular practices of reenactment and performance self-classified as "medievalish".[3] Politicians cultivate new uses for the ever-present adjective "medieval".[4] Occasionally, those images emerge in the classroom. As such, they can and have been used in teaching, mostly taken as by-products of the "pedagogical device" that the Middle Ages has not ceased to be.

How could the latter direction become, for undergraduate students, more systematic and more productive as a learning mode? Such was my point of departure in the project I am about to present. I would like to describe here one experience of teaching the history of the Middle Ages by using concrete examples of American medievalism. "Medievalism" refers to the emergence of images and perceptions of the Middle Ages after the eighteenth century, including the works of scholars and also artistic, architectural, literary, visual and musical creations inspired by historical realities perceived as "medieval". Although the first attempts at such a cultivated

1. Rosenthal, David. "Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History", *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History*, Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, Sam Wineburg, dirs. New York-London: New York University Press, 2000: 64.

2. Barrio, Juan Antonio. "The Middle Ages in USA Cinema". *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum*, 2 (2008): 229-260.

3. Those would be the numerous "medieval and Renaissance festivals", reenactments and fairs, as well as forms of commercial entertainment that propose, for instance, to experience "medieval banquets and tournaments" staged in a theme-park environment: de Groot, Jerome. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2008: 119-127.

4. A pervading use of "medieval analogies" can be detected, for instance, in American neoconservative writing of the turn of our century to classify "stateless" societies: Holsinger, Bruce. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007.

memory of the Middle Ages can be traced back to the works of antiquarians and writers from seventeenth-century Europe, it was in the decades preceding the French Revolution that a new interest for all things "medieval" emerged, for instance in France and in England.[5] The success of the "medieval revival" in nineteenth-century architecture and decorative arts, in Europe as well as in the Americas, is the most familiar aspect of medievalism in western societies. As such, this movement influenced the appearance of many cities of North America. As the traveler heading north in the Baltimore-Washington highway can observe, the first visual perception of the dowtown area of Baltimore includes the emblematic replica of an Italian gothic tower, the "Bromo-Seltzer Tower", a fine example of this enfatuation with "medieval" forms. In Baltimore, and due to the "medieval revival" of the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages is all around us.

1. The project

The "Medieval Baltimore" project started in the context of three undergraduate courses covering the history of the High Middle Ages. It is currently hosted in a webpage accessible from the site of Towson University. The target population of these courses offered at a public comprehensive university consists mostly but not entirely of History majors who have previously taken general introductory courses on European History (a prerequisite), and mostly live in the metropolitan Baltimore/ Washington area. The courses also attract other students of diverse backgrounds and educational levels, a few graduate students, and "non-traditional" students interested in European studies. To clarify what type of experience these courses propose, we can give the example of general outcomes formulated for one of the courses: to analyze and interpret textual, material, and visual sources from the central period of the European Middle Ages (1050 to 1350 AD); to understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of European societies in this period; and to appreciate critically current historical explanations and debates regarding the environmental, economic, social and cultural changes occurring in Europe between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries. The courses also aim to improve students' writing skills. In some cases, these courses might have more specific thematic approaches, for instance, the history of medieval cities, or the history of women in the Middle Ages. They are all contained, however, within the general curriculum area of medieval European history.

While researching several models and so-called "best practices" aimed at incorporating writing into the learning of medieval history, I explored Paul Halsall's inspiring web project started in the 1990s at Fordham University. One of its pages is a "guide of medieval New York" written by the instructor and students interested in

5. Gossman, Lionel. *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment. The World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968; Alexander, Michael. *Medievalism. The Middle Ages in Modern England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

tracing the reflections of the medieval past in New York City.[6] To develop a similar collaborative writing project based on the research of history students seemed appropriate for the undergraduate courses I teach. The research could focus on the urban environment of Baltimore with its abundant evocations of European architecture, and it could take advantage from the city's excellent museum resources. A first compilation of examples of neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque buildings still standing in Baltimore quickly ascended to more than a dozen, and this sample revealed direct connections to monuments in Italy (for instance, the Lovely Lane church), in Spain (as in the Chizuk Amuno Synagogue), in England (as the Memorial Episcopal Church of Bolton Street attests) or in France (with a very early example of neo-Gothic revival, the Catholic Chapel of St Mary's Seminary), to name but a few. The Medieval section of the Walters Art Museum alone is comprised of several hundred artefacts in display whose places of origin can be traced to different regions of medieval Europe and the Mediterranean world.[7] Two of the course's main goals mentioned above could thus be targeted: to understand the diversity of European societies (well represented in Baltimore's surviving architecture as well as its diverse museum collections), and to produce a significant amount of writing resulting from a contact with primary and secondary sources for the study of the Middle Ages.

Learning history by exploring contemporary cities is a sound theoretical proposition. In a multimedia essay about Los Angeles, Philip Ethington proposed "historical mapping" as a practice of urban history that would achieve the combined tasks of "assembling knowledge about cities" and "put at our disposal a large collection of representations" of them. In this perspective, "the 'terrain' on which the history of a city can be apprehended is a vast *landscape of the present*, strewn with artifacts accumulated from countless 'past' moments of human labor".[8] Others have indeed used maps, both modern and old, in order to build a multilayered cartography of present-day cities with links to historical interpretation as devices for research and teaching. In these new hyperlinked maps the past can be successively "peeled back" in a chronological series of topologies made possible by modern cartographic tools.[9] "Medieval Baltimore" can also evolve as another repository of assembled knowledge about urban America —that is, another experience of mapping the past by accepting artifacts and architectures as material sources revealing different temporal layers in the city.

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6. Halsall, Paul. "Internet History Sourcebooks Project". *Fordham University*. 10, December 2006. History Department of Fordham University. May 15 2010 <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/medny.html#IX>.

7. A good introduction to the collection can be accessed at the Walters website: <www.thewalters.org>.

8. Ethington, Philip J. "Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge. A Multimedia Essay", *American Historical Review* (electronic version), 2000. 15, May, 2010 <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK>.

9. See for instance: Presner, Todd *et alii*. "Berlin: Temporal Topographies". 2003. UCLA Center for Digital Humanities. 15, May, 2010 <http://www.berlin.ucla.edu/research>.

Furthermore, a project of this type dispenses with teaching that would be done, so to speak, in a vacuum. Having taught medieval history at the university level in different countries and encountered different modes of learning, I have often reflected upon the ways in which teaching history can be contextually specific rather than made of a repertoire of fixed themes and approaches. Is the familiarity with a Gothic building, for instance, easier to promote in a European city than it is in the United States? And how much does the experience of entering a medieval palace or a church influence that familiarity? Such questions were in the background of the attempt to transform the courses by using the city of Baltimore as a venue for the study of the European Middle Ages. What specific pedagogic design would this decision entail, and what could be gained from such an approach? As I read the texts of nineteenth-century American authors and architects, I became aware that even such questions, too, had an interesting history that could be shared with undergraduate students.

Some immediate concerns and requirements came to mind in the initial phase of project design. The project would be place-specific, resulting in a collection of student's contributions associated with one particular location, in this case, Baltimore. The teacher's expertise is not especially relevant within the local context, her input being largely that of a specialist in the non-local, that is, in European history. This did not seem detrimental to the learning process. Taking into account a greater degree of familiarity that the students might reveal with nineteenth- and twentieth-century American history, the project engaged them in research that mobilized areas of historical knowledge in which they were potentially more proficient than the instructor. As the city of Baltimore became their object of study, students applied that knowledge about American history to build a historical understanding of the place.

To give but one example, the Lovely Lane church of downtown Baltimore is a well-preserved Methodist church built in the last decades of the nineteenth century whose façade is a replica of the medieval Benedictine abbey of Pomposa in Italy. This fact is pointed out in the initial list of buildings proposed to the students as objects of study. The knowledge about the importance of denominational and religious identity in nineteenth-century urban America helped some students formulate relevant questions about the material resources needed to undertake such an architectural project in Baltimore. The abbey of Pomposa, however, was to be the ultimate goal of their research, aiming at understanding a Benedictine community of monks as a medieval type of institution, and a specific human configuration.

Such an ambitious pedagogical goal requires clarity in purpose and motivation. To promote the downtown areas of the city of Baltimore as an object of study, students must be led beyond the compilation of an artificial catalogue of monuments inserted in an urban landscape that is either invisible or seen as degraded and dangerous. A targeted didactic approach helps promote a deliberate avoidance of the search for the picturesque which would reinforce that isolated view of the "old buildings". With that goal in mind, a general narrative is provided of how the city came to be what it is today, a narrative aimed at launching a contextual interpretation of the

specific monuments and buildings to be studied, as well as placing the collections of medieval art kept in the museums into that urban context as well. Inviting a colleague who teaches the history of Baltimore to deliver a special guest lecture early in the semester is one way to make this possible. By having the specialist lecture to the class, the history of the city is demarcated as an area of study with its own questions and approaches, to be explored for the specific purposes of the "Medieval Baltimore" project. The initial perception of a building as simply "old" should lead into a more systematic examination of the different layers of the past to be deciphered in it, a task that is not always made easier in the case of medieval artifacts, as it were, by the specific frame of the museum environment.

One sound point of departure for the project was the common requirement of the term research paper that each student has to write. The individual research paper is an adequate format to promote an encompassing experience for the whole duration of the semester. The paper is broken into several components achieved in successive stages, and it is a well-tested frame for the acquisition of research techniques as well as for the improvement of writing skills. An experiential, first-hand contact with the tasks of research is combined, in the "Medieval Baltimore" project, with the suggestion that the student "look again" to places already known[10] in his or her effort of rendering familiar realities a means of connecting with the distant past, both in time and in space.

The only requirement for the individual student research project, in general terms, is that temporally and spatially distant objects and historical entities be coupled for the purpose of historical enquiry. Thus the student can go from a first movement of historical awareness of the urban environment of Baltimore used in everyday life to a critical perception of the historical significance of many aspects (and specific buildings) of the architecture of the city, or of the many objects collected in its museums and other cultural institutions. This process will lead him to a search for specific aspects of the medieval past through a reconstruction of multiple articulations between past and present realities of the city of Baltimore. In the museum or in the art collection open to the student's visit, the objects are presented inside an orderly frame, already classified as "medieval" art objects or historical artifacts. That pedagogical vantage point is inherent to the first choice of subject for a significant part of the student projects. Similarly, a list of suggested buildings or itineraries in the older neighborhoods of Baltimore was compiled and made available in the syllabus or program of study for these courses. This list is, of course, flexible and open-ended.

10. We borrow here the title of the inspiring book by: Dorsey, John. *Look Again in Baltimore*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Some examples of Baltimore buildings suitable for the project "Medieval Baltimore"

1. Lovely Lane Methodist Church (1887), St Paul and 22nd Street
2. Baltimore City Jail (1859), East Monument Street
3. Engine House number 6 (1853-54), Gay and Ensor Streets
4. Chizuk Amuno Synagogue (1876), Lloyd Street
5. Mount Vernon Methodist Church (1872), Mount Vernon and Washington Places
6. Emerson Bromo-Seltzer Tower (1911), West Lombard Street
7. St. Mary's Seminary Chapel (1808), 600 North Paca Street
8. Temple Oheb Shalom (1893), Eutaw Place and Lanvale Street
9. St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1854-6), Charles and Saratoga Street
10. Cathedral Church of the Incarnation (1909-47), University Parkway and St. Paul Street
11. Green Mount Cemetery Chapel (1856), 1501 Greenmount Avenue
12. Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation (1889), Maryland Avenue and Preston Street
13. St John's Episcopal Church (1847), Huntington, 3001 Old York Road
14. Grace and St. Peter's Episcopal Church (1852), Park Avenue and Monument Street
15. Christ Church (1869), St Paul and Chase Streets
16. Memorial Episcopal Church (1864), Bolton Street and W. Lafayette Ave

Illustration 1: Sample list provided to the students.

In the remaining options of collaboration in the "Medieval Baltimore" project, the same strategy is adopted of proposing as a starting point a choice of feasible, productive objects of study. The existence of such lists obviates the relatively short times available for the initial choice of subject for the individual research projects. The advantages of this approach, however, are not only practical but also methodological. In other words, the museum served as a model in this project for the pedagogical move of constructing an ordering frame that can reveal, from the start, a meaningful urban landscape, but can also be analyzed critically. The research project, therefore, is bound to reveal the frame as well as the object itself. Categories such as "Gothic", concepts requiring a historical definition such as "Abbey" or "Public Palace" are identified in order to show the students how historians interpret the past by naming, categorizing, establishing and explaining chronologies. The museum, as well as the list provided by the National Register of Historic Places, both use those same categories and concepts, and the students are encouraged to define and discuss them.

Another goal present from the start was to make the students' thinking and research more public, ideally reaching beyond the university campus. Student term

papers are written to convey the knowledge that they acquired about the Middle Ages, in its connections with the present and the past of the city of Baltimore. The idea of making the best student papers available to a wider community of readers adds an incentive to the usual restricted academic purpose of student writing. The Internet is, for the students, a familiar and important place to disseminate their thinking. It is also an ideal place for collaboration between students of the same class, and even between successive divisions enrolled in the courses. For the purpose of dissemination of final texts, a web-based environment was created for the collaborative writing project that is currently fed, as a regular electronic journal would be, by student research done in successive semesters. Papers are classified and collected in an archive, after due authorization is obtained from each student, and they are made available to each new class as an incentive to continue the research already done. When a text is submitted as a finished contribution to be posted on the webpage, it may have several authors.

Illustration 2: Access page of the project: <http://pages.towson.edu/rcostago/medieval.html>.

Adding a process of review and editing of student papers moves the learning process beyond the usual format and end result aiming at one single reader: the instructor. One of the students takes the voluntary role of general editor for several semesters and, modeling the process of expert or peer-reviewed publication, the papers are submitted for publication to an editorial board composed of the

instructor and the editor. This emphasis put on doing (researching, writing, but also revising and editing) challenges the perception that the college history course aims at merely “creating a copy of someone else's knowledge” of the Middle Ages “on the student's head”.[11] Research, even if done at the undergraduate level, has great potential to shape the ways history is learned. The student in the “Medieval Baltimore” project is invited to abandon a passive role as the mere consumer of the ascribed meaning(s) proposed to him by the heritage monument or the museum object, and to appropriate himself of those realities by turning them into objects of historical enquiry. Publishing the result of his work, he is also led to experience what is at stake in a researcher's claim to authorship.

2. Three modules, three areas of collaboration

The project is currently divided (May 2010) into three modules: “Buildings”, “Objects” and “People”. Each area can be accessed as a separate repository of visual, textual and multimedia materials in the webpage. Creating distinct thematic areas of collaboration allows for incremental development of the different sections. Each section of the project also achieves specific outcomes. “Buildings” is a module devoted to the study of traces of the Middle Ages in Baltimore's urban landscape and architecture. It includes texts written, for instance, about the numerous neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque public and private buildings of the city, starting with the ones that are still standing, without necessarily disregarding in the future those that have disappeared. This section explores a local resource of immediate physical access, the buildings themselves, and it has a potential impact on the students' awareness of preservation issues related to the metropolitan area.[12]

“Objects” proposes the museum as a place of study, and opens up a different area of work to the students' research, simultaneously revealing the practice of collecting in Baltimore as a form of cultivated memory of the European Middle Ages. This section of the project promotes or activates existing partnerships of the university with the museums of the city, in particular the Walters Art Museum

11. Kolikant, Y. Ben-David. “Digital Students in a Book-oriented School: Student's Perceptions of School and the Usability of Digital Technology in Schools”. *Educational Technology & Society*, 12/2 (2009): 131-143.

12. Since the 1960s, the preservation of nineteenth-century buildings in most American cities has been a reality, Baltimore amongst them. Some authors have noticed the temporal coincidence between the Landmarks Preservation Act of 1965 and important changes in the way American architecture is studied, as exemplified by the publication in 1966 of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: Kaufman, Edward; Irish, Sharon. *Medievalism. An Annotated Bibliography of Recent Research in the Architecture and Art of Britain and North America*. New York-London: Garland, 1988: 44. For an overview of preservation in the United States, see: Wallace, Mike. “Preserving the Past: A History of Historic Preservation in the United States”, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996: 178-221 (I am grateful to my colleague Patricia Anderson for providing some guidance in this field).

and the Baltimore Museum of Art. Both museums host magnificent collections of medieval art.

The "People" section is the third module, and its goal is to present medieval studies as a lively area of scholarship and research, as well as a diversified field of professional practice in the city of Baltimore. The student in this case takes one scholar or professional medievalist working in the metropolitan area —in fields as diverse as musicology, conservation of manuscripts, academic research in history or art history, paleography, costume and jewelry design, to name but a few— and interviews and/or follows his or her activities throughout the semester, providing a written or multimedia contribution about this experience for the "Medieval Baltimore" webpage.

How can all of this become a helpful tool to learn about the history of the Middle Ages? One way to start answering this question is to make clear what this project *is not* set to achieve. As such, the collaborative research of the students does not aim at providing a general framework for his/her study of the history of medieval Europe. This framework should result from an encompassing learning experience that also depends on other aspects and activities of the courses, including more or less extensive readings of primary sources and textbooks, lectures, practical sessions and discussions, etc. Instead, the project simply collects the provisional results of multiple connections established by the students among present entities —the building, the museum artifact, the medievalist— and the past we are studying in the courses. "Medieval Baltimore" currently provides an area of collaborative work inside and across several courses aiming at transforming the learning experiences by promoting a more active style of learning.

The research process of the students is premised upon a specific diachronic perspective, that of the identification of at least two layers of sameness or appropriation related to distinct temporal planes. As they discover more about the city of Baltimore, in particular in the sections named "Buildings" and "Objects", medieval history becomes for the students an object of study that is twice removed from the present. In other words, there is in the project a constant tension, discussed later in this essay, between researching about Medievalism *per se* and the study of the Middle Ages. The close orientation of students throughout the research process remains a necessary, albeit demanding task, in order for the different temporal planes to be kept distinct and separate, in an attempt to make explicit for novice history researchers how to achieve this reflective, counterintuitive mode of looking at the city.

For instance, a process of identification of formal sameness across a divide between two temporal planes generates the research for the "Buildings" section. On one plane, we have the architectural form or specific monument classified as "medieval", on the other the nineteenth or twenty-century building in the city that is related to the first. To return to our previous example of the Lovely Lane church, the students start by recognizing a formal similarity between that church and the Abbey of Pomposa, in Italy. One of the research projects consisted in the analysis of the internal structure of the Benedictine abbey, locating the church inside the

medieval complex of buildings, in order to compare it to the plan of the Baltimore church in its urban context. The comparison revealed major and significant differences beyond that first level of perceived similarity. Those differences opened up at least two different areas of research for successive teams of students. One is centered in the nineteenth century experience of the architect Stanford White and his clients, the other on the eleventh and twelfth century rural society in the delta of the Po River, where the abbey of Pomposa is located.

The goal of perceiving the historical particularity of each time and place must be clearly articulated and reinforced, however, at all stages of the research process. The acquisition of knowledge about the Methodist church in its urban context is not a self-sufficient aim; it is presented from the start as a means to an end. Students are encouraged to identify and explore the several coexisting and interactive layers of cultural memory in the work of the late nineteenth-century builders of Lovely Lane by carefully separating those layers in a temporal sequence. The separation allowed, in some cases, for a reflection upon the relative nature of periodization, as some students considered the long chronology of Pomposa abbey by using plans of its buildings dating from the 1500s and 1700s, and others searched for the writing of Stanford White to answer questions about his problematic perception of Pomposa as a "medieval" church.

In the "Objects" section of "Medieval Baltimore", this separation of temporal planes appears to be more easily achieved because of the existing museum categorization, but students are similarly encouraged to consider questions of provenance, not only to "travel back" to a place of origin in Europe suggested to them by the museum catalogue. The question "how did this object end up in our city" reveals that the need to "inscribe" the object, to classify it, to authenticate it represents another, different path for the cultivation of a memory of medieval Europe.[13] What was embedded, obscured and freely combined in fragmentary ways in the "neo-medieval" architecture (for instance the church of the abbey of Pomposa in the Lovely Lane church façade) is now revealed and made explicit by the museum display. Architectural memories of medieval forms are a "mute" reality in the buildings of Baltimore, though one clearly capable of acquiring different meanings as much as be ignored by the many passers-by in the city. In contrast to the building, the museum "speaks" to us; it "narrates" the Middle Ages by privileging one single temporal layer of the history of the artifacts on display and providing exact identification of places and dates of their fabrication. Nonetheless, other cultural symbols, other layers of the past of the city also recede into the background in the museum display, most notably the ones that are related to the constitution of the medieval art collections as a cultural practice of the wealthy educated classes and philanthropists in early-twentieth century Baltimore.[14] A simple awareness of the historicity of the museum

13. Urry, John. "How Societies Remember the Past", *Theorising Museums*, S. Macdonald, G. Fyfe, dirs. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996: 45-65.

14. Johnston, William R. *William and Henry Walters, The Reticent Collectors*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999; Price, Marshall. "Henry Walters: Ellusive Collector", *Medieval Art in America. Patterns*

collection is useful to the student's purpose of interrogating the history of medieval Europe by "letting go" of the museum narrative in order to create their own.

The eclecticism of Baltimore architecture constitutes a precious and original resource for this project, as does the coexistence of multiple architectural models —coming from Italy, England, Germany, Spain, or Greece— within the same urban landscape.[15] There is a clear advantage in studying "Medieval Europe" not as a single historical entity (as is often the case in undergraduate history courses), and not even as an assembly of discrete, stable and unified realities, which would be the European countries, perceived as unchanging entities coinciding with the modern nation-states. Instead, the "architectural quotations" of Baltimore buildings, utilizing details of monuments recognizable to the informed eye of nineteenth-century architects, propose to the student a multiplicity of places. Each of those places becomes more easily detached from an exclusively "national" perspective of analysis. This type of approach can promote a vision of the cultural complexity abstracted, for instance, in the textbook map about "the expansion of Gothic architecture" by suggesting specific locations, specific buildings as objects of study. A similar observation has been made about medieval art collections in American museums. In contrast to the "national" or local frame of most museums in Europe, the museums of Baltimore offer a parallel experience of objects from different regions of the continent. In the third section of the project named "People", students again make contact with many possible paths for the study and appreciation of medieval Europe through the medievalists living and working in the metropolitan area. In this section, the project addresses the changes that separate modern practices of the disciplines of medieval studies from the visions of the Middle Ages of architects or collectors living and working in the Baltimore of the 1800s and early 1900s. But it also shows the continuous and heterogeneous intellectual and artistic activity that medieval Europe stills inspires today.

3. Difficulties and pitfalls

Using American Medievalism to teach about the European Middle Ages is an indirect approach that might seem, in light of our previous description, unnecessarily complicated and full of obstacles. Although such a pedagogical project has the potential to familiarize the students with different uses of the medieval past in American culture, as we have seen it does not replace more direct forms of instruction and learning, in particular through contact with primary sources unrelated to the city of Baltimore. Museum artifacts can be used, pedagogically, as

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of Collecting, 1800-1940, Elizabeth B. Smith, dir. Pennsylvania: Palmer Museum of Art-Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996: 127-132.

15. Dorsey, John; Dilts, James D. *A Guide to Baltimore Architecture*. Maryland: Tidewater Publications, 1997; Hayward, Mary Ellen; Shivers, Frank R. *The Architecture of Baltimore. An Illustrated History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

primary sources for the study of the Middle Ages. That approach is not outside of the sphere of experiences encompassed in the project we are describing. However, the "Medieval Baltimore" project is designed to promote research about museum collections also as part of the history of the city. This means that the collections are not merely proposed as "repositories of sources" but as the historical result of active processes of recovery, conservation, gathering, and categorization of the material remains from the medieval past.

The project does not ignore the well-known conclusion of many studies of American medievalism, epitomized by the peremptory declaration of Norman Cantor: "The image of the Middle Ages (...) at any given period tells us more about the difficulties and dilemmas, the intellectual commitments of the men of the period than it does about the medieval world itself".[16] However, "Medieval Baltimore" disregards grand generalizations by proposing a more modest and more skeptical approach to the use of medievalism in history learning. Several productive directions have emerged in the research undertaken by the students while they considered the "medievalizing countercultures" present in urban America in the 1800s and early 1900s and the ways in which those helped to bring forth, in a paradoxical way, critical views of the coming of an inevitable modernity.[17] Observing those images of the medieval past(s) leads the students to appreciate not only how architects and collectors of the two last centuries, as one intellectual historian puts it, "endowed modern functions with the aura of tradition"[18] but also used the medieval pasts of Europe to rethink their own urban societies. Those images are, as the students are the first to point out, the most resilient aspects of "the Middle Ages" that is offered to us as modern consumers in film, in computer games, or in other forms of popular culture.

Using American medievalism to learn about the Middle Ages, if done within a concrete framework such as that of the history of a city, is not a glib or circuitous pedagogical choice. It is a choice that can result in clear gains by making possible a reflective and higher level of historical understanding. The pitfalls of this approach, as suggested earlier, reside mostly in letting the tension between the two objects of research be solved by folding them into one single temporal layer, privileging

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16. Cantor, Norman. "Medieval Historiography as Modern Political and Social Thought". *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3 (1968): 55, as quoted by: Kaufmann, Irish. *Medievalism* cited in note 11. An even more radical generalization is repeated by the same author in his book published decades later: "No book about the European Middle Ages written before 1895 or so is still worth reading except for curiosity's sake because the data base was inadequate and because the phantasmagoric screen of now-obsolete Victorian assumptions shaped perceptions of the past that are too remote from the understanding of the late twentieth century to be worth bothering about": *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*. New York: William Morrow, 1991: 44.

17. Schorske, Carl E. "Medieval Revival and its Modern Content: Coleridge, Pugin and Disraeli", *Thinking with History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998: 71-89. For a useful comparison between England and the United States, see the seminal article by: Kenney, Alice P.; Workman, Leslie J. "Ruins, Romance, and Reality: Medievalism in Anglo-American Imagination and Taste, 1750-1840". *Winthertur Portfolio*, 10 (1975): 131-163.

18. Schorske, Carl E. "Medieval Revival and its Modern...": 73.

one single perspective, that of the study of medievalism. It would be simple then to conceive of "the Middle Ages" as one compact, abstract, undistinguishable "chunk" of several centuries of European history in which students would simply find ideas that did help since the 1800s the formulation of problems relevant to modern times. That is not the approach of the "Medieval Baltimore" project. In the "Buildings" section of the project, therefore, what is proposed is not the search for any essentialized "medieval" reality embodied in the various monuments or objects for which the National Register of Historic Places would provide a catalogue or archive. Buildings have a context, that of the history of Baltimore city. Similar emphasis is put on the social history of Baltimore in the "Objects" section. The discovery of different contexts for the museum artefact, rather than letting it "speak for itself" about the Middle Ages, highlights the discontinuity and difference which are major themes of our study of medieval Europe, opening the research projects of the students to the pursuit of the historical differences they would consider important.

Trying to tie together buildings and places separate in time and place, or to establish and explore connections between museum objects and contexts from the distant past are undoubtedly difficult tasks for undergraduate students who attempt the study of the history of the Middle Ages for the first time. The well-established format of the term research paper, however, allows them to tackle those difficulties by mobilizing familiar strategies, which they have used with more or less success in other learning experiences.

It is too soon to address the other question that we need to ask: what type of knowledge of the Middle Ages becomes familiar to the students through their collaboration in this project. Local realities, after all, become mere vehicles for active processes of learning, but those also appear to induce a recovery of a narrative that highlights the centrality of "the Middle Ages" in a definition of Europe and European culture as the "non-modern" entity that provides a "usable past" for a "new world". It remains important, in my view, not to claim too much for this project. Its relative modesty of means, the informal and open atmosphere of collaboration between students of different skills and competences have triggered a myriad of reflections and areas of future work instilling, for instance, the respect of a set of best practices regarding copy-right of texts and images, including that of the students' own writing and creations.

The city and its cultural institutions are used in this project to foster an unfinished and problematic vision of what the "Middle Ages" can be, fundamentally a domain of historical enquiry and aesthetic appreciation, as well as a set of professional and scholarly practices, an overall reality that remains much more open-ended and exciting to the students than any textbook might, by itself, convey[19]. A recent

19. The importance of textbooks in secondary education must not be underestimated in our practice as college teachers. In the USA "only 39 percent of the twelfth-grade students in the 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) history assessment claimed to have read material from a source other than a textbook": Britt, Marie A.; Perfetti, Charles A.; Van Dyke, Julie; Gabrys, Gareth L. "The Sourcer's Apprentice", *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives,*

survey on prevailing forms of historical thinking among adults living in the United States seems to suggest specific obstacles exist to the perception of the distant past, those eras prior to the recollection of family trajectories, national narratives and vernacular memories. It is from the latter that adult Americans seem to extract most of of the basic elements of a sense of familiarity with the past. The Middle Ages might be all around us in American cities, yet it remains difficult to recognize. Concluding his commentary on the results of the survey, Roy Rosenzweig proposed: "We need a history teaching that is somehow simultaneously more local and more global and cosmopolitan, more shaped by popular concerns, and more enriched by insights based on systematic and detailed study of the past".[20] The experience of constructing the "Medieval Baltimore" webpage seems to address some of these desiderata.

For my own teaching the project became a reinvigorating moment, mostly because of the fluid and multiple paths established between Europe and the United States, the present and the past of many familiar places. To say that history is (or should be) part of the culture of a nation is a goal both too artificial and too narrowly conceived to inspire our teaching practice today. History is part of reality, as it is also a way of addressing the realities of our lives. Together with my students, in developing this project, I was led to reflect how those realities will include, if we pay attention, the traces of multiple pasts as they enter in conjunction with our present.

Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, Sam Wineburg, eds. New York-London: New York University Press, 2000: 438.

20. Roy Rosenzweig. "How Americans use and think about the Past. Implications from a National Survey for the Teaching of History", *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History...*: 280.