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# ALT-HISTORY

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What is the difference between “historiographical argument” and “conspiracy theory”? Between “fake” and “real” history when both draw on the same sources? Why have some narratives become culturally normative while others have been dismissed as the work of partisans, forgers, heretics, or cranks, only later to be accepted as established history—and vice versa? This research colloquium gives students practice in evaluating the methodologies and tools by which historians judge the narratives they tell about the past by applying them to a range of narratives typically rejected by contemporary scholarship as “fake”: the existence of King Arthur, the Black Legend of the Spanish Inquisition, and the Tartarian Empire of the American Mid-west. As a corollary, we will also consider why such alternative histories have arisen when and where they do, as well as the uses to which they have been put culturally, socially, and politically.

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

Richard Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend*, revised edition (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986)  
(ISBN 978-085115-254-6)

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe  
(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) (ISBN 978-014044-170-3)

Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) (ISBN 978-030018-051-0)

All other readings will be available through Canvas: Files or on reserve in Regenstein Library through Canvas: Library Reserves.

#### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. **Reading and participation in discussion:** This course is designed as a colloquium, meaning, a seminar intended to help you develop research questions and practice finding materials for answering them. The assigned readings are intended as starting points for discussion and debate. Some texts you may find harder to read than others, depending on your own previous training in history. This is on purpose. It is often said that history is written by the winners, which is close, but not exactly true: history is written by historians. The “winners” are those whose version of history becomes so widely accepted that it seems insane to question it. The primary goal of this course is to give you practice confronting narratives that have this aura of “truth” by comparing them with narratives that contest them—and vice versa. Revisionist history is not necessarily a conspiracy theory, but neither is it necessarily correct simply because it contests the accepted narrative. As historians, we need to learn to tell the difference between ghost stories and fairy tales, not to mention between propaganda and wishful thinking.
2. **Exercises.** Each week, in conjunction with the assigned readings, you will have an exercise to prepare for our class discussion. These exercises are intended to be cumulative so that by the end of the term, you have developed the skills to pose robust historical questions. History is not just a matter of telling stories about the past; it is also a contest between stories which their tellers believe are true. But how do we judge between different versions of the story? Finding better evidence is a part of the process, but the same evidence may yield diametrically opposed interpretations. It is essential for historians to be aware of this tension between evidence and interpretation so as to become aware of our own frames for “truth.” The best way to become aware of this tension is to confront it directly in debate, in full awareness of how challenging that debate might be. Happily, even the most challenging debates become easier to confront with practice, including those on which our own sense of reality and meaning depend.
3. **Final paper** (15 pages, double-spaced, with bibliography). Your final paper should draw on the exercises and assigned reading to develop a research question of your own. You may choose to do an historiographical survey of previous work on your question or an analysis of a particular source relevant to your question. Your own argument should consider both pro and con in answer to your question, but you should make clear in your conclusion which side you find more persuasive—and why. Final paper due **March 10** on Canvas.

**Grading:** Your work for the quarter will be assessed cumulatively, with the expectation that your reading and exercises will contribute directly to writing your final paper. The more work you do in preparation for the discussions, the more you will have to draw on in writing your

paper—this is the way research works! I will place greater emphasis on the final paper (approximately 55%), but with the expectation that the final paper clearly reflect engagement with our reading and exercises over the course of the quarter (roughly 35%). Attendance and participation also count (roughly 10%). Come see me in office hours if you have any questions!

#### READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

### **January 5 Who owns history? Amateurs vs. Professionals**

“AHR Forum: The Old History and the New,” with David L. Ransel, Theodore S. Hamerow, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Lawrence W. Levine, Joan Wallach Scott, and John E. Toews, *The American Historical Review* 94.3 (1989): 654-698

*Exercise:* Bring an example of “alt-history” from your own study of history to share in class (5-minute presentation; 1-2 page write-up—post pdf on Canvas).

### **January 12 Tartaria I: Pro**

James W. Lee, *The One World Tartarians: The Greatest Civilization Ever to be Erased from History* (Open Source ISBN 979-879644-174-9) [Canvas: Files]

*Exercise:* Pick a section of Lee’s argument that you find persuasive and explain why (10-minute presentation; 2-3 page outline—post pdf on Canvas).

### **January 19 Tartaria II: Con**

Lee, *The One World Tartarians*

*Exercise:* Disprove your section. To make your case, you may use any kind of evidence or argument that you have found, whether on the Internet, in books, in videos or podcasts, in photographs, recordings or sources in other media. Make a bibliography to hand in (post pdf on Canvas) and be prepared to present your case in class (10 minutes).

### **January 26 King Arthur I: History or Myth?**

Everybody read: Barber, *King Arthur*, chapters 1-4, pp. 1-102

*Debate 1: Geoffrey vs. William*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, parts 6-7, pp. 186-261

William of Newburgh, *History*, trans. Joseph Stephenson (London: Seeleys, 1856), Prefatory Epistle, Preface to the Ensuing History, pp. 397-402

*Debate 2: The Quest for the Holy Grail*

Joseph Goering, *The Virgin and the Grail: Origins of a Legend* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

G. Ronald Murphy, *The Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

*Exercise:* There will be two teams for each debate. The teams should prepare together (4 teams, 3 persons per team). Each team will submit an outline of its argument, to be revised after the debate (pdf on Canvas).

## **February 2 King Arthur II: Pagan or Christian?**

Everybody read: Barber, *King Arthur*, chapters 5-9, pp. 103-200

### *Debate 1: The Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. J.R.R. Tolkien

Ronald Hutton, "What is a Pagan Survival?" and "Epilogue: The Green Man," in *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe. An Investigation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 1-40, 159-92

### *Debate 2: Arthur of England*

Ronald Hutton, "Arthur and the Academics" and "Glastonbury: Alternative Histories," in *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (Hambledon and London: London, 2003), pp. 39-85

Michael Wood, "King Arthur: Lost Again?" and "Glastonbury, the Grail and the Isle of Avalon," in *In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 23-70

*Exercise:* There will be two teams for each debate. The teams should prepare together (4 teams, 3 persons per team). Each team will submit an outline of its argument, to be revised after the debate (pdf on Canvas).

## **February 9 Library Field Trip: The Medium is the Message**

Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1967) [Canvas: Files]

Wigmore Abbey Chronicle and Brut Chronicle, Regenstein Library Special Collections MS 224  
[<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.MS224>]

Ingersoll Lockwood, *Travels and Adventures of Little Baron Trump and His Wonderful Dog Bulger*, illustrated by George Wharton Edwards (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1890)  
[<https://archive.org/details/travelsadventure00lock>]

*Exercise:* Study the library catalog and bring books and other printed materials to class that support your research question. If you find things that are in Special Collections, you will

need to send me details by Monday, February 6. You may also share items with other students. Finding aids: <https://guides.lib.uchicago.edu/subjectguides>.

### **February 16 Spanish Inquisition I: The Black Legend**

Kamen, *Spanish Inquisition*, chapter 15, pp. 374-93

Richard L. Kagan, "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," *The American Historical Review* 101.2 (1996): 423-46

Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1906-1907) [HathiTrust <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001416441>]

*Exercise:* Read over the Tables of Contents in all four volumes of Lea. Choose a chapter to analyze. Pay attention to the way Lea constructs his account, his use of sources, the interpretation he gives the evidence, his use of rhetoric, the assumptions he makes about motivations and purpose. Report to the class (10 minutes; post notes in pdf on Canvas).

### **February 23 Spanish Inquisition II: Historians on Trial**

Kamen, *Spanish Inquisition*, chapters 2-4, 9-12, pp. 13-91, 226-327

David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), chapters 5-6, pp. 183-245 (notes 519-31)

E. Michael Jones, *The Jewish Revolutionary Spirit* (South Bend, Indiana: Fidelity Press, 2008), chapters 4 and 6, pp. 129-44, 199-219 (notes 1059-60, 1064-65)

*Exercise:* Class will be divided into teams representing each of the three historians (Kamen, Nirenberg, Jones). There will be a fourth team representing History. Team History will be charged with conducting the trial. Each of the three "defendants" will be called upon to present his case and to answer questions put by the tribunal. Defendants will be able to accuse each other as well as answer in their own defense. Each team will post notes on Canvas prior to the trial, to be revised after the debate.

### **March 2 Alt-History Redefined**

*Exercise:* Reports on research for final papers (10 minutes each). Post outline on Canvas before class; revise after presentation.