

HIS 307

Silk Roads and Spice Routes: Travel, Exploration and Discovery in the Medieval and Early Modern World

Satisfies: GLO, DIV, and SBS+

Thematic Categories: "Arts, Ideas and Culture";
"Empires, Violence and Global Connections"; "Race, Religion, Gender and Sexualities"

M/W, 9:30 – 10:50 AM

Professor Mohamad Ballan

How globalized was the world before the modern period? What connected famous explorers like Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and Christopher Columbus to people who traveled the globe as part of their daily lives as merchants, diplomats, and sailors? Travel was a central feature of the medieval world and one of the primary factors that contributed to cultural contact, communication, exchange, and the diffusion of ideas between Europe, Africa and Asia in the pre-modern era. This course will explore the interconnected histories of the medieval world, focusing primarily on the Mediterranean world—Latin Christendom, Byzantium and the Islamic world—between roughly 500 and 1700. It will also devote attention to travel and travelers in the Atlantic world (including West Africa), the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and China during the same period. Whether the motivation was exploration, piety, knowledge, survival, or profit, the act of travel involved the travelers in larger processes of interaction and exchange between cultures. We will examine the lives and accounts of pilgrims, merchants, scholars, slaves, and soldiers to investigate what motivated people to travel to, from, or within regions throughout the medieval world, and how they portrayed their experiences. With an emphasis on primary sources and class discussion, we will explore the writings of a diverse group of travelers and situate them within their larger social, cultural, and political contexts, while at the same time coming to terms with their reasons for travel and their particular worldview.