Globalizing the Medieval:
a Methodology

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The "global Middle Ages" is a provocative concept, evoking strong responses both for and against its utility and applicability. This is in part because it appears to make a certain set of claims: ones that either look too grand to fit the evidence, or, alternatively, ones that seem to so significantly reproduce what historians have long argued about trans-regional connections that the term becomes mere window dressing. But what if we approached the "global Middle Ages" as a method rather than a claim?[1] How could "globalizing" our study and teaching about the pre-1500 past change not only the words we use to describe that past, but also our understanding of the meanings of it, particularly regarding the ways in which distant regions, cultures, and peoples were linked to each other?[2]

A globalized system is not simply one in which some societies participate in important linkages across distances, but one in which the connected regions are inextricable from each other and from the system itself.[3] Such interdependence could take many shapes, but I think that multidirectionality is an important hallmark of globalized connections: we cannot only think about global connections as a conduit for goods, people, or ideas from

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1. "As a framework for the Middle Ages, the 'global' becomes structural, a scaffold through which to hold the past; and as such, it never loses the potential for centers of power to reformulate and recast their imperializing nets. As a method, however, the 'global' becomes an entry for exploration that never rests too long before shifting focus, thus maintaining a humility of *not*-knowing in the pursuit to know." Sierra Lomuto, "Afterword: Motions of Global Periodization," *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 285–91, at 286.

2. In this short essay, I focus on the approach/method of "global/izing" rather than on temporalization of the "medieval," but the entire project of GMA is of course bound up in the complexities and dangers of periodization. See for example, Geraldine Heng, "Early Globalities, and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique," *Exemplaria*, 26, nos. 2-3 (2014): 234–53; Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett, "Periodization and 'The Medieval Globe': A Conversation," *The Medieval Globe* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1–14; Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power, "Globalizing Cosmologies," *Past & Present*, 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 88–115; Sierra Lomuto, "Becoming Postmedieval: The Stakes of the Global Middle Ages," *postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (2020): 503–12; Sierra Lomuto, ed., "The 'Medieval' Undone: Imagining a New Global Past," special issue, *boundary 2* 50, no. 3 (2023).

3. Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: Norton, 2014), 150–51.

one place to another. Decentering is another key aspect of the methodology. Studies that claim to be "global" but reproduce the Eurocentric models of the past or rely upon a center-periphery model have failed in the basic premise.[4] Therefore, to consider a set of networks "global" or "globalizing" rather than "trans-regional" or merely "connective" is to imagine a formative role for those connections in fundamentally shaping the societies involved. Thus the connections themselves must be an object of study.

So, what do we get when we apply a global methodology to the centuries of 500--1500 CE? Does it tell us something new and different about cultures in contact, or suggest new questions we might ask of our evidence? I offer here two perspectives informed by my own work: a research-focused example and a teaching-oriented one.

My first book was about the island of Sicily and its multidirectional connections around the Mediterranean across three eras of Sicily's history that are usually studied as distinct periods (the years of Byzantine, Muslim, and Norman dominion, corresponding roughly to the sixth–twelfth centuries).[5] I set out with the goal of breaking down traditional periodizations and countering the pernicious paradigm of center and peripheries. To demonstrate the multinodal and multidirectional networks in which Sicily was involved, I examined evidence for travel and communication networks, and how they shifted over time, between the island and multiple other regional nodes of power (political, cultural, economic). My methodology was to approach communication as a transactional process that both creates and results from enduring connections between places and cultures, drawing them closer together or pushing them farther apart at different times and for different reasons. Economic connections were not prioritized over spiritual, cultural, or diplomatic ones; instead, the aggregated weight of multifarious acts of communication showed the ways that Sicily "moved" between various cultures both before and after regime change. It was, I argue, part of many "civilizations" at once—moving slowly from one orbit to another as though by gravitational pull, or held in tension between them. Viewing the island itself as conceptually mobile, simultaneously subject to numerous forces acting on it both from within and without, helps avoid some of the pitfalls of periodization, teleological thinking, and Eurocentrism.[6] Studying multinodal and multidirectional mobility is thus one key method for investigating a decentered and globalized history of the medieval world.[7]

In teaching the global Middle Ages, I find that material objects help elucidate my argument about multidirectionality and mutual interdependence. In some ways, the easiest set of globalized connections for students to comprehend are the economic ones that

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4. Another expression of this idea, described as multipolarity, is found in Xiafei Tian, "Spacetime, Connectivity, Multipolarity, Juxtaposition," *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 217–28.

5. Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

6. It also emphasizes global-*izing* as a process. Sharon Kinoshita calls this "worlding." Sharon Kinoshita, "Marco Polo in trans-regional perspective," *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 229–37.

7. I should admit, however, that I never used the word "global" in this book. I wonder now how the work would be different if I had explored the possibility of understanding my subject through this lens.

resulted in the transport of huge amounts of commodities like spices and silks across the eastern hemisphere, from China and Southeast Asia, through the Indian Ocean or across the Silk Roads, and thence into Byzantium, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Scholars have long appreciated the far reach of these trade links and the importance they held for the cultures and economies of the Middle East and Europe. But to view the world through a global lens requires a shift of perspective. It asks us to focus less on the receivers of foreign goods and more on the connections and connectors, and particularly on the complex nature of exchanges that transformed the meanings of items as they passed from one culture to another.[8] It also asks us to interrogate the limitations of such exchange and focus on the agents of exchange as much as on the products themselves.

One example I use frequently in the classroom is that of silk.[9] This teaching unit highlights technological transfer, economies of trade and gift exchange, and the kind of multidirectional cultural movement that can be visualized.[10] Silk technology originated in China, and Chinese-made silk threads and textiles were highly valued even after sericulture spread across the hemisphere. While the process of harvesting and weaving silk came from China and moved westward, one popular decorative style found on textiles—a roundel of flowers or pearls encircling the mirrored image of animals, birds, dragons, or hunters on horseback who aim arrows at prey—originated in Iran and spread eastward. For example, Tang-era silks such as the one in figure 1 show the mixing of an originally-Chinese image like the dragon with the Persian style of the mirrored image inside a roundel of pearls. But because the dragons in this image have no heads, it has been suggested that the piece was woven in Central Asia, where the dragon was less well known and less important until later in the medieval period. So a Chinese image and Chinese technology have been combined in a Persian style on a textile crafted in Central Asia, thus pulling from multiple directions at once. Such multidirectional interplay of images and technologies is characteristic of early medieval cultures in contact with each other. The transfer is not unidirectional, but simultaneously moving in several directions at once.

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8. For example, Nile Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange Between Christianity and Islam," *Al-Masāq* 18 (2006): 27–66.

9. This is based on parts of a global medieval studies textbook that I co-wrote. Kimberly Klimek, Pamela Troyer, Sarah Davis-Secord, and Bryan C. Keene, *Global Medieval Contexts: 500 – 1500: Connections and Comparisons* (London: Routledge, 2021), 77–92 and 102–7. Another useful teaching resource is Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, "Textile Mobilities across Medieval Afro-Eurasia," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 31 (2023): 192–207.

10. Another great teaching example is the Belitung wreck. See Geraldine Heng, "An Ordinary Ship and Its Stories of Early Globalism: World Travel, Mass Production, and Art in the Global Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1 (2019): 11–54.

Fig. 1. Textile with Pearl Roundels with Dragons (late eighth to ninth century, China or Central Asia, silk). Metropolitan Museum of Art 1998.147.

This style also spread westward to Byzantium, where eastern silks were sold directly by Sogdian merchants from the late sixth century. This teaching unit focuses significantly on the Sogdians, a Central Asian people who were very important as connectors along the various nodes of the Silk Roads, as cultural negotiators and transmitters, as well as agents of culture themselves (particularly famous for their music and dance). I show students a Tang ceramic tomb statue featuring musicians dressed in Sogdian clothing and riding on camelback. This piece is decorated in the "three-color" style of glazing, although on this item we actually find four colors: green, amber, cream, and blue. The blue glaze was made with cobalt, a mineral mined in Iran. As a foreign import into China, cobalt was presumably

traded by the Sogdians themselves. It was also quite expensive, indicative of the elite nature of this finished object. Thus this object highlights the importance of the Sogdians by depicting them using the very same luxury commodities that they were responsible for transmitting across long distances.

When sericulture migrated westward to Byzantium (from the sixth century), a silk industry arose in Constantinople and eastern Mediterranean regions such as Syria and Egypt. Along the way, the style of mirrored images in a roundel picked up other imagery from other sources. The example in figure 2 draws from the ancient Greek myth of the Amazons.

Fig. 2. Roundel with Amazons and a Cross (seventh to ninth centuries, Byzantine Egypt or Syria, silk). Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987.442.5.

Sometimes the imagery was more explicitly Christianized, as in figure 3, which depicts holy warriors rather than hunters. They use cross and spear to attack a serpent, a common early Christian image of the devil.

Fig. 3. (left) Square with Holy Warriors Spearing a Serpent (seventh to eighth centuries, Byzantine Egypt or Syria, silk). Metropolitan Museum of Art 46.156.18a.

Fig. 4. (right) Textile Fragment with Hunting Scene (eighth century, Egypt, silk). Metropolitan Museum of Art 51.57.

After the eastern Mediterranean became part of the Islamicate world, the former Byzantine silk workshops produced silks with Islamized scenes and styles. For instance, the fragment in figure 4 resembles the scene with the Amazon warriors but with the addition of the Arabic "bismillah" above the hunter's head. So we have styles, technologies, images, and specific items moving across the eastern hemisphere through trade, exchange, gifting, and conquest. They change meanings, adopt new images, shift subtly as they move, but they also bring cultures together through the acts and agents of movement.

Silk textiles later became one of the most important cultural and economic commodities in the medieval Mediterranean, produced in both Islamicate and Christian cities and circulating as diplomatic gifts, prestige objects, and, at varying levels of fineness, also items for daily use. I conclude this unit by showing students some of the Mediterranean silk textiles crafted by or for Christian cultures using styles meant to invoke Islamicate textiles with Arabic script. One example is the twelfth-century Batlló Majesty, a large wooden sculpture in which Christ on the cross wears robes that were likely meant to call to the viewer's mind silk textiles made in the Islamicate Mediterranean, featuring floral roundels and pseudo-Arabic on the hem.

To be sure, not every location within the eastern hemisphere participated in these, or any other, sets of connectivities. There are, without a doubt, limitations to the utility of this global methodology for the centuries 500–1500 CE, and the example of multidirectional movement of silk technology and imagery is not intended as representative of every part of the planet. The point of globalizing our approach is not necessarily to claim planetary comprehensiveness. Many topics may not benefit from using this method, or may lie outside of the zones of connection. Globalizing work is also difficult. It asks us to move outside our comfort zone and work collaboratively alongside scholars with languages and disciplinary training that we do not ourselves have. This is why we must carefully distinguish between "global" as a claim and as a method—it is simply one potential method that might or might not prove useful to any given study.

Could we do this kind of work and teaching—emphasizing multidirectional and multinodal interdependence—without the moniker "global" attached to the methodology? Assuredly. But one potential benefit to employing this provocative label is to actively invite conversations with those who study the post-1500 period, when global/izing is accepted as a frame of analysis without question. To invite comparisons and conversations with those studies is to help break down the medieval/modern divide and, hopefully, to enrich both.

To do global work in pre-1500 centuries well, I think we must do it carefully. We must, first of all, resist homogenizing distinct cultures, blanket applications of the method or its findings, continued Eurocentrism, or reliance on a center-periphery model. We must resist the institutional impulse to use "global" as a stand-in for DEI initiatives or as an excuse to limit faculty hires.[11] Indeed, we must insist that to do GMA well, we need more scholars and teachers, not fewer. We must also focus on collaborative, adventurous intellectual work that

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11. Lomuto, "Becoming Postmedieval."

puts us in conversation with other scholars, both pre- and post-1500. We must find ways to bridge traditional divides in scholarship and publishing. We must remain humble, seeing ourselves as interdependent with networks of scholars with specialties different than our own. We must recognize multiple centers and multiple temporalities.

We must also continue to value scholarship that resists the global, that focuses on regional, emplaced, and narrowly focused studies of locations not in connection with each other. Not all scholarship can or should be global in scope, nor should everyone focus on connections. At the same time, if used judiciously, the global/izing methodology might yield important new insights and lead us to understand the 500–1500 centuries in new and better ways.