Interview with Björn Weiler

Michael J. Kelly

Björn Weiler is Professor of History at Aberystwyth University, and has held visiting fellowships at Bergen, Cambridge, Freiburg, and Harvard. He is the author of King Henry III and the Staufen Empire (2006) and Kingship, Rebellion and Political Culture (2007), and is currently completing a study on kingship in high medieval Europe, entitled Becoming King in Medieval Europe. Future projects include work on historical culture in high medieval Europe, and the English chronicler Matthew Paris.

1. Networks & Neighbours (N&N): *How did you come to study the Middle Ages?*

Prof. Weiler: Through an inspirational teacher: when I was an undergraduate at the Free University in Berlin, I really wanted to become a late modernist, but students had to take at least one medieval history paper. As it happened, the one I took, on Frederick Barbarossa and the Crusades, was taught by Kaspar Elm, one of the few members of the professoriate in Berlin who took teaching seriously. I then went on an Erasmus year to St Andrews, where Rob Bartlett, Lorna Walker, Simone MacDougall and Hugh Kennedy finally put an end to my modernist proclivities.

N&N response: *Do you think there is, or should be, sustained engagement and dialogue between historians across chronological boundaries, whether medieval, modern or other?*

Prof. Weiler response: Absolutely! I strongly encourage undergraduates interested in medieval history to take at least one or two classes in modern history, simply so as to see what changed, and why. The same goes the other way round, of course. If I

wanted to be flippant, I would argue that Ian Kershaw would never have cut it as a modern historian, had he not first worked on the late medieval account book of Bolton Priory. Having an awareness of other periods of history just makes it that little bit easier to appreciate what may be distinctive about one's own little patch.

There are other advantages as well. My colleague Peter Lambert (who works on Nazi historical culture) and I recently organized a conference at the British Academy on historical culture and uses of the past. Part of the idea was to challenge some of the underpinnings of memory studies, where so much of the work is horribly presentist and engaged in chronological navel gazing, and to revisit some of Hobsbawm's and Granger's *Invention of Tradition*, which claimed that this was mostly (though not exclusively) a modern phenomenon. We brought together quite a good group of people, working on everything from eleventh-century Constantinople to twentieth-century Ghana, visiting Moghul India, Renaissance Iberia, and nineteenth-century New Zealand along the way, with art historians, anthropologists, literary scholars and, of course, historians. Peter and I are editing the volume at the moment, and what has transpired is just how many features were shared: ideas of what constituted legitimate evidence and legitimate sources (including a sixteenth-century Spaniard who predated Ranke by three centuries in his definition of what was proper, professional history), the way historical debates were conducted, the uses to which history was put, and so on. There were, of course, culturally and chronologically specific features, and enough variations on common themes to prevent anyone from trying to come up with a rigidly universalist model. Still, so much of what we would have associated with a period of mass literacy and mass communication to a considerable extent built on, amplified and accommodated rather than that it replaced practices and structures already evident in much earlier periods, and in cultures other than the West. What did change, though, was the idea of what constituted legitimate sources, and that shift came into its full after World War II. What exactly that shift was, and why it occurred, well you will need to read the book to find out.

Similar unexpected continuities or breaks may well be observed when looking at topics such as globalization: yes, the geographical horizons of the thirteenth century

may have been more limited, but we did have Nestorian Christians from China sent west, had Armenian priests as a matter of course visiting English Benedictine monasteries, and merchants shipping marble from the Upper Nile all the way to London. The same goes for immigration: Erik Spindler in Berlin is looking at Flemish emigrants to England in the later Middle Ages, and does so alongside colleagues who work on modern refugee and migrant communities. The results are still being analysed, but it seems that many basic structures – even how diasporas work, etc. – have remained fairly stable. And even that modernist chestnut of the development of an international system after 1648 can probably be revised with relative ease. At the Leeds IMC this year (2014), there was quite a productive set of roundtables, comparing medieval and post-medieval theories and practices of empire. None of this is, of course, to argue that human societies never change, just that changes were either not as dramatic as we tend to imagine, or that the real shifts and transformations took place elsewhere. To find out where and why and how, in turn, is of course something that can only be done when people whose expertise can cover a very long stretch of time work together.

> 2. N&N: In your research you deal with the space between popular and royal perceptions about the role of kingship in the earlier Middle Ages. *How wide, and how effective and affective, were these expectative gaps in constructing or negating social, royal and other power?*

Prof. Weiler: To be honest, I'm not sure that we can always identify what kings thought the role of kingship was, at least not easily before the thirteenth century. Some very interesting work has been done on Ottonian and Salian charters, and how far they may have been dictated by the ruler himself, and that can prove useful. Richard Turner did something similar for the charters of King John in England, but by then the volume of charters was so enormous that asking how far the king was involved in drafting these documents becomes a moot point. Other sources pose similar problems: Ludger Körntgen, for instance, did excellent work on Ottonian and Salian book painting, much of it centring on the problem of royal involvement in producing these artifacts. The same goes for historical works: even Otto of Freising, whose *Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* had been commissioned by the emperor, did not

shy away from criticizing the ruler, and in the end defined above all Otto's ideal of kingship. Frederick seems to have liked it, but that is all we know.

There still are occasional glimpses, though, that allow us to guess what kings may have thought about their role: David Carpenter, for instance, has found some wonderful snippets in the *Fine Rolls* of Henry III of England, in which the king seems to have intervened in the drafting (though the examples David found reveal a ham-fisted sense of humour rather than an ideology of kingship). Similarly, while the administrative sources for England can allow us to see certain patterns (favourite fest days, how much money was spent on which royal pursuit, etc.), and while that is a lot more than we have from Germany, let alone Scandinavia or Central Europe, it still does not add up to something that allows us to see a royal ideology of kingship. What we do have, though, are quite few sources for ideas about kingship as they circulated among the elites of the realm. On one level this means that we are engaging in shadow-boxing: we are trying to figure out what kingship was without knowing much about what kings thought kingship was. At the same time, we also learn something about the range of different ideas about kingship that circulated. Most of them go back to the same basic set of principles – justice, piety, defending the realm. Interesting is what different authors expected these to mean.

That, in turn, brings me to the second part of the question. How one answers that depends on what one thinks about the role of ideas and ideals in politics. Personally, I think three factors are important. First, nobody wanted to be perceived as a tyrant or usurper. There were practical reasons for that (about which more in a moment), but also issues of self-perception. Rodney Barker, a political scientist at the LSE, produced a lovely little book, *Legitimating Identities*, which puts this in a more sophisticated theoretical framework. If not kings and pretenders, then their dependents, advisors, allies needed some assurance as to the legitimacy of a particular course of action – and that need probably became more pronounced the further from the centre of gravity an actor or group of actors operated (who, in turn, had their own set of advisors, etc. to deal with) – material gains obviously played their part, but so was the need to meet certain expectations (if a claim was both feasible and just, it was a lot easier to get one's followers to come along, in turn).

Second, we need to be aware of the issue of contingency: what values meant, which values were invoked, which interpretation was prioritized, was contingent on a particular historical situation. I have recently done some work on royal succession, where the ideal was pretty clear: the closest male relative – ideally the eldest legitimate son – should succeed. Yet in practice that hardly ever worked: sometimes there were no sons, or several equally closely related male relatives, or no male relatives at all, or they were under age, or incapacitated, etc. Furthermore, the ideal operated in competition with another principle: suitability (the one best suited to be king should succeed to the throne). The two were by no means mutually exclusive (pretenders normally invoked some degree of consanguinity, and eldest sons were trained to demonstrate that they were suitable before they became kings themselves), but how they were balanced out, which elements dominated, and how the required relationship between the two was defined, was dependent on the particular constellation of actors, their ability and willingness to pursue one particular reading or set of readings. Yet people virtually always acted with reference to a shared set of norms, i.e. what norms meant could be open to interpretation, but they had to be upheld. Third, a set of norms, if successfully implemented or upheld on successive occasions, could itself become normative to the exclusion of others. The real fun begins once those dissatisfied with a ruler, for instance, began to use a set of generally accepted norms to turn it against the monarch. If pretenders were normally eager to show that they acted with pure motives, the need to do so was even more pronounced among rebels. How successful they were, was, of course, also historically contingent.

N&N response: First, on Barker's book *Legitimating Identities,* I am somewhat apprehensive about Barker's political conclusions and his fondness for social scientific and cognitivist approaches. However, I think it is an important piece in that it gets us re-thinking in important directions about the psychology behind leadership, and the consequences of self-legitimation. *Do you see, in the early or central middle ages, any patterns of consequences derived from acts of self-legitimation, or any evidence of a psychology behind rulership? If so, what were the conditions for such consequences and supposed psychology?*

Second, you say that it is difficult to find, in the Central Middle Ages, royal perceptions of kingship and their role in constructing legal documents. In Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in Spain for example, it is everything the historian can do to find evidence of the king's function that is more tangible than theories and prescriptions of law and kingship. It seems, then, that we, as earlier and later medieval historians, are in a complementary epistemological situation, for determining the perceptions and functions of kingship in the respective periods. I would argue that the reason for the contrast in royal approaches was determined by the collective, social consciousness about 'kingship'. The idea was relatively, if not totally, new to many people in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, especially in Spain, whereas by the thirteenth century it was well entrenched. Thus, it is evident that 'kingship' was perceived, at the very least, as an inevitable and 'obvious' way of life: it was an underlying truth of their worlds. This is structurally similar, to give an example from today, of the collective conscious about capitalism: it is evident from popular culture that we live in a tremendously 'ideological' time, for it is easier for people to imagine the end of the world, through environmental, nuclear or other human-made catastrophe, or even intervention by 'God', than it is to imagine the end of capitalism as a way of life. This suffocating domination of a real, a mediating truth, of, for instance, kingship as 'obvious fact' of existence, produced stable kingdoms relative to, say, the Visigothic one, which lacked such a pervasive and domineering truth. *Do you think it is difficult to find expressions of kingship in the Central Middle Ages because it was an unconscious thought? Do we need, then, psychoanalytic or other psychological tools to reach it? Had kingship become the 'norm' that was un-thought, and unthinkable to live without?*

Prof. Weiler response: Concerning the first point (and part of the second), a psychology of rulership would be intriguing, but could be difficult to do in practice. I would love to find something equivalent to Shakespeare's depiction of Prince Hal transforming into King Henry V, and while there are passages that seem to foreshadow Shakespeare, there also are immense methodological issues involved in using them. There certainly was an expectation that kings acted in a particular fashion – serene, not given to outbursts of emotion (except when the situation required they cry or be angry), calm, humble (but never excessively so), and so on.

Such demeanour was, of course, meant to convey a certain inner disposition, itself indicative of key royal virtues: constancy, urbanity, justice, and so on. How far kings actually felt that way is trickier to ascertain, of course. There are accounts of kings acting differently in public than in private, but then so do many of us (I interact somewhat differently with my students, my colleagues, friends, or family), and we cannot always be sure that what we are dealing with is a literary device (making a point) rather than (or as well as) an accurate description.

It certainly would be quite interesting to talk to psychologists who work on the psychology of power. Actually having living people to talk to and analyse gives them an advantage we lack. But then we also face the problem that Philippe Buc pointed out in the sometimes uncritical application of social science theory to depictions of ritual: our sources simply have not been composed with the questions in mind that we would like to ask of them, whereas modern psychology has, of course, developed its theoretical models and practices in relation to a very specific historical moment. And there is always the danger of going down the route of those desperately Freudian readings of Guibert of Nogent and his poor mother. This does not mean that we cannot wonder whether certain types of psychological response would not have been triggered in similar circumstances in the past. It would be interesting to see what psychologists make of these issues, and whether it is possible to find a way round them. One avenue would perhaps be to move away from kings, and to look at how subjects interacted with the ruler (where perhaps more use could be made of modern studies: even those positively disposed to Barack Obama [and I would number myself amongst them], for instance, would not claim that he was put in place by God, but there is a mystique surrounding the office of the presidency that could make for potentially intriguing parallels).

Coming back to the second question, I think you are absolutely right: kingship was assumed as given. Even the Italian communes rejected the practice of imperial lordship, not necessarily the idea. Though Iceland complicates matters a little. Still, in general I very much like your comparison: kingship was a bit like the acceptance of capitalism as the normative system of economic organization in the West. I am not sure, though, that there was one collective consciousness deciding what kingship

meant, just as capitalism can mean very different things in communist China and Texas, as opposed to the German ideal of a social market economy, or in an ideal Scandinavian context. Similarly, even those accepting capitalism as normative have very different ideas as to what that norm means in practice: social democrat trade union activists, Silicon Valley technocrats, sweatshop owners in Indonesia, government officials in Japan, academic economists in Chicago (as opposed to those at CUNY or Harvard), HR managers in British universities, small cornershop owners, and so on, all have very different ideas as to what capitalism actually entails, how a capitalist economy should function, and how to balance often conflicting normative expectations embedded within the general idea of capitalism. The same very much applied in a medieval context relating to ideas and practices of kingship. Again, the psychological dimension could be intriguing: I am thinking, for instance, of the Diana funeral mass outpouring of grief, or the Queen mum funeral (enlightening to watch for those of us working on kingship). But then we find it quite possible to imagine a world without kings, so wonder how far we can project back in time.

But this variety of views also meant that most high medieval kingdoms were far from stable. Look at twelfth-century Norway for instance, which makes Visigothic Spain look positively boring by comparison, but even England or Germany or Sicily were an unholy mess during the twelfth century. People may have been more happy to accept the idea of kingship, but not a particular kind of kingship, or a particular king. The Norwegian and Hungarian case are really quite interesting in this respect, as kingship coincided with conversion, and that could bring with it an idea of royal power that many leading subjects seem to have found difficult to accept (a key theme in Icelandic foundation legends, for instance). Equally, though, that political instability and debate persisted for centuries after the conversion could suggest that the problem was less the idea of kingship per se, but that kingship and its definition became a means with which to discuss other issues and pursue different aims. That is, again, a bit like capitalism in a modern context.

3. N&N: It has often been argued that law in the earlier Middle Ages functioned 'symbolically', as an associative category of legitimate authority (as a master-signifier). *To what extent to do you think theories of kingship were forms of cultural capital, not only for the monarchy but its antagonists? More broadly, should we imagine 'kingship' as a trope representing a mediating point between abstract and concrete power?*

Prof. Weiler: There certainly are instances where writing about kingship accrued cultural capital: it seems, for instance that the canons of Rheims and the monks of St Denis expressed their claim to oversee the coronation of the French king through the production of elaborate *ordines*, liturgical texts purporting to describe how the coronation service was meant to be conducted. Similarly, of course, the production of texts mattered for those most likely to educate a prince, to train the future king. Knowing what kingship was, or how a coronation was supposed to unfold, and demonstrating that knowledge, was a means of acquiring and displaying cultural capital with an eye on using it. Alternatively, there are narratives like the *Historia Welforum*, a history of the Welf dukes of Bavaria, written in the late twelfth century, where the dukes and their forefathers distinguish themselves above all by being stroppy: they were certainly loyal, but would never grant kings more than was absolutely necessary. Moreover, the *Historia* describes the Welfs as being far better at performing the duties of kings than the kings whose subjects they nominally were. The *Historia* thus preserved a tradition, and preserving it could have done the monks producing the text no harm, but it also illustrates a rather neat paradox: the Welfs defined themselves by being very good at the one thing they were not (kings). They voiced not so much opposition towards as haughty disdain for kings by upholding the very values of royal lordship by which their rulers so notably failed to abide. This is the more interesting, as the *Historia* was written long before the Welfs ever got round to claiming the throne. They knew what kingship was much better than any king.

Texts like coronation *ordines* or the *Historia* also served as markers of status, distinguishing their authors and patrons from rivals and peers, but also from other groups within the realm. Yet this is also where the problems begin: we will find it

quite difficult to trace writings that were first and foremost theories of kingship. The lively Carolingian tradition of mirrors of princes, for instance, petered out in the tenth century, and the genre was not revived until the very late twelfth century. Formal treatises were, of course, still being produced, but they remain few and very far between, with a very limited circulation. The forum of debate shifted elsewhere, most notably to the schools, and the production of Biblical commentaries, but also the writing of regnal and dynastic histories. In both instances, though, the idea of kingship was certainly important, but it was not necessarily and not always the central focus of writing. This does not rule out the possibility that cultural capital was acquired that could be used to define or limit kingship. Many regnal histories, for instance, highlight the role of the court and courtiers in guiding royal governance – which, considering how many of these texts were written by or on behalf of leading members of royal courts, is at least worth keeping in mind. At the same time, these writings cannot be reduced to being only about the role of the court: they were also attempts to trace or fashion a history, to construct a framework that placed an author's contemporaries in a shared line of tradition, most of it centring on the realm rather than any specific group within it (which, in itself, could be worth pondering). Cultural capital played a part in this, but it was not necessarily acquired in relation to the king.

All of which also means, of course, that it is difficult to describe kingship as a trope – a topos presupposes a degree of recurrent uniformity in the imagery deployed that did not always exist in the case of kingship. And still there was something of a mediating role (though that was also claimed by other lords): between the divine and the affairs of humankind. This function was rooted in the assumption that royal power derived its purpose from God, who allowed individuals to become king, but who expected them to perform certain functions in return (which was, of course, also a neat way in which kingship could be challenged). One of the means by which God designated potential kings was by allowing them to become more powerful than other lords. But that power also had a purpose: there is a rather nice letter by Peter Damian to the margrave of Tuscany, composed in the 1050s, in which Peter writes that if the margrave finds the exercise of justice too arduous, he should cede his lands to the emperor, who would at least have the resources to do justice. And that

may perhaps also serve as a useful reminder of the extent to which kingship was meant to be demonstrated and experienced, something that was expected to be more than just a textual construct. Exactly because the king's power was so great, though, some subjects might argue that he required guidance and counsel and some mechanisms by which his power could be constrained and channeled: there was thus a real practical urgency to some of the writings we are dealing with.

N&N response: You suggest the difficulty in finding historical texts dedicated exclusively to theories of kingship. There are, however, *historia* in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, that are a sustained critiques of kings and kingship, for example, the *Historia Roderici* and *Historia Silense*, Jiménez de Rada's series of *Historia*, and, in Britain, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. There are also instances of kings writing *historia*, such as Alfonso X. *Do you think that such political uses of historia provided a type of cultural capital for the authors against their detractors (including kings) or other potential sites of antagonism? If not, what sorts of cultural, salvific, or other, capital would the authors of Historia, or other types of history-writing, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both employ and expect to receive for and from their historical narrations?*

Prof. Weiler response: You are of course right, there were quite a few texts engaging with the deeds of kings – to your examples could be added William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum*, for instance, and, of course, Otto of Freising. And kings popped up everywhere in historical writing. But then the problem is not so much a lack of sources about kingship, as a lack of, first, the kind of theoretical treatises produced under the Carolingians and then again post-1200, and second, sources revealing what kings thought kingship was.

Thanks also for bringing up Alfonso (I really should have remembered that one). There are a few similar texts as well, further strengthening your point: James of Aragon and his *Book of Deeds* and Sverrir of Norway, who, it seems, dictated or wrote the early parts of *Sverrisaga*. A nice little gaggle of texts, written or with their writing overseen by kings, and all in the vernacular. Though again the problem is that we need to make sure how far the kings themselves wrote these texts: I seem to

remember (and may of course be wrong) that James of Aragon had someone write the text, and he made emendations and suggestions. Even so, there was a degree of royal editorial control that did not exist, for instance, with Otto of Freising or William of Malmesbury. What makes matters even more complicated is that Sverrir, for instance, it seems, may have been destined for a clerical career. Still, those 'royal' texts are really rather interesting: James of Aragon invoked quite a few standard images of kingship, and would make an interesting case study as to how far the kind of ideas we find in Latin sources were taken up in these vernacular texts – though one would need to be careful not to postulate too clear a distinction between clerical and lay authors and audiences. What those three texts also reveal, though, is a particular expectation of what historical writing was – which, incidentally, could be a great project for someone who can read Catalan, Old Norse and Castilian – that is, a list of deeds and battles, and relatively little of the meditations on themes of power that William of Malmesbury produced, for instance.

That brings me to your main question. Writing history served a number of purposes. There was, for instance, the need to find origins: communities wanted to know where they came from. These origins, in turn, could form the basis for pursuing legal and property claims, or a means of projecting prestige for the community – Amy Remensnyder did great work on monastic foundation legends and their desire to find some sort of connection with the Carolingians, a desire that, incidentally, also comes through in many dynastic chronicles. Antiquity equaled prestige and precedent, though the capital accruing from these efforts did not necessarily benefit the individual author so much as his community (with exceptions, such as Goscelin of St Bertin, who, it appears, toured English monasteries a generation after the Conquest, commissioned to write new and up to date *Lives* of Anglo-Saxon saints).

But returning to the specific point you raised about texts dealing with kings: a key question here has to be the intended audience of a work. The *Historia Compostellana*, for instance, constructed resistance towards royal encroachments as a key feature in the communal identity and tradition of the community. In Lincoln, as Matthew Mesley has suggested, the cathedral chapter commissioned saints' *Lives* as a means of instructing the bishop in how he should interact with the king as well as the

chapter. Particularly intriguing are regnal histories produced for or by members of a royal court. To some extent these were probably simply and plainly histories of a community, accounts of its place within the greater course of human history. That place could of course be fashioned so as to convey a particular message. Saxo Grammaticus thus had the history of the Danes parallel that of Rome, except that as Rome's power declined, that of the Danish kings increased. Much of this image was also directed at Denmark's southern neighbor, the Holy Roman Empire, and therefore makes the image somewhat less preposterous than may at first appear to be the case. Other such writings also contained accounts of how kingship, for instance, first emerged, what it was meant to accomplish, and how important it was that good rulers had advisors who knew how to counsel the monarch, who would be willing to restrain and direct the ruler.

Providing such instruction, in turn, could be seen as offering a kind of pastoral care. Those writing regnal history provided their fellow-monks, their patrons and possible lay readers with a set of models as to what constituted good and bad behavior. I would at the same time caution against reducing historical writing to being just a means of instruction and model building. Moreover, the salvific value of writing history could express itself in other ways, too. Matthew Paris, for instance, felt that historians should record strange signs and wonders, even if they did not know what they meant: their meaning would become apparent to future generations. Conversely, in writing about the remote past, a writer of history could read these signs, uncover their meaning, and thus get a sense of God's intervention in the affairs of humankind. There may have been an apocalyptic dimension in this as well (though I have not yet made up my mind on this), in the sense that knowing history would perhaps not so much allow people to foretell the second coming, as to prepare for it.

Last but by no means least, it could also simply be important to record striking and important events lest they be forgotten. That could be a means of ensuring that lessons be drawn, but also because something was of such striking importance that details had to be preserved. The wave of crusading chronicles produced in the first few decades after 1099 may well fall into that category. I also wonder whether

someone like Matthew Paris wrote in quite so much detail about contemporary affairs because, in researching the distant past, he realized just how much had been forgotten because nobody bothered recording it. In more general terms it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves how little even monastic or cathedral communities knew about their past, their saints and relics. St Albans, Matthew's community, would make a great case study: the abbey is today famous for the vast historiographical output produced in various bursts between the late twelfth and the mid-fifteenth century, but if we look at these narratives in detail, we often find evidence of frustration with just how much had been forgotten or remained unknown. Whatever the ultimate aims of a historian, I would venture, most of them realized at some point the fragility of their endeavor, recognized their dependence on sources that were often inadequate or had simply been lost. Without filling those gaps, though, and without ensuring that similar gaps did not exist for their own time, none of the various goals they may have set for themselves could be achieved. This still does not mean that what they did was necessarily embraced or highly treasured by their peers – I would imagine that many medieval abbeys were like the modern public sector, where careers were made not by producing great chronicles, but by securing funding and patronage, doing the abbot's bidding, and keeping the serfs in line. What kind of capital authors thus acquired is difficult to say, and will also depend on the context within which they wrote. They certainly made use of cultural capital (as they possessed the knowledge and the skills to provide something others might find desirable), but that does not exhaust what they got out of writing history.

4. N&N: *What do you feel have been the major developments in the study of power and rulership in medieval Europe in recent years, and how would you explain the continued fascination with the subject?*

Prof. Weiler: I would not substitute myself for what is quite a wide and diverse field, and if you ask others you may well get very different answers. I certainly learned a lot from the 'ritual turn' associated with Gerd Althoff, Hagen Keller and the Münster School – the importance of symbolic communication as a means of governance in medieval Europe. And that approach has had quite an impact in broadening what we mean by political culture and politics, even among historians of

medieval England: see, for instance, Nick Vincent's work on pilgrimages and the Virgin Mary, Levi Roach on Anglo-Saxon political culture, or the studies Lars Kjær and Ben Wild are about to publish on gift-giving in high medieval England. To these names should be added Tim Reuter. His finely tuned sociological approach to what peace-keeping meant, for instance, resistance or violence has considerably expanded how historians approach the issue of medieval political culture, as has, by the way, Tom Bisson's work on the experience of power in medieval Catalonia.

Furthermore, there has been a renewed attempt to engage with the sources themselves. The Canterbury project on charters has done some exciting work in this context, much of which, of course, goes back to Michael Clanchy's *Memory to Written Record* (one of the real classics every medievalist should have read). That is, just like kingship, charters were symbolic markers of status – the size of the document mattered, the kind of seal that was attached to it, etc. – but its symbolic dimension was inextricably linked to the concrete reality that it was meant to define and codify. There is a lot more that can be done with this: Adam Kosto recently gave a superb paper in which he went through one – very long – charter from Catalonia, and demonstrated just how many different layers of meaning and applicability were contained in this one document (he counted about fifty). Similarly, lots of work has been done on narrative sources – not a new field as such (Beumann did great work in the 1950s), but pursued with renewed vigour: why did people actually write chronicles, for instance? What questions can we ask of these materials, and which ones would it be futile to pose? A lot of that renewed interest may reflect Philippe Buc's attack on the uncritical use of ritual as a concept, which has forced us to think more about the historically contingent nature of the evidence (as well as of the concepts) we use.

As to why the topic still fascinates: on a very pragmatic level, it used to be quite unsexy to deal with kings and queens and political history (it certainly was when I did my PhD). Consequently, there was an opportunity to say something new and exciting, to apply different methodologies and questions to a vast corpus of sources. Second, the questions asked in relation to kingship are rather central ones: what is the legitimate reach of governmental power, how can norms be used and abused,

how could the ruled seek to define and perhaps curtail the power of the ruler? So, really, it was a combination of a field left unusually barren; a vast range of exciting materials; and a set of approaches that allowed scholars to solve quite a few methodological problems while also looking at these sources with fresh eyes and to ask rather different questions.

N&N response: *Do you think the relative fascination with kings, queens and political history in the '60s to '80's, in contrast to since then, is also due to the wider cultural and political situations in Europe?* That is to say, that during the decades of protest and before the collapse the Soviet Union, which was also during the development of social history, cultural studies, postmodernism, and radical critiques of elite power, there was a decrease in focus on 'kings and queens' history. Since then, as can be seen widely across cultural media today, fascination with domination (and subordination), aesthetic power and royalty have returned, in a period that is now often labeled post-ideological and the 'end of history'. *How much do you think wider cultural obsession with monarchy and the lives of elite – whether reality TV stars, soccer players or princes and princesses - is part of the renewed interest among historians? What do you think are some of the consequences of this, especially with how 'history' is perceived and how its role in academia and public life is imagined?*

Prof. Weiler response: I am not sure that infatuation with lives of the rich and powerful is necessarily a very recent phenomenon: gossip always sold quite well, and there always was an infatuation with celebrity. What may have happened is that celebrity is more easily acquired (and lost) in a modern context, simply because there are more media outlets with a wider reach and quicker turnaround. How far that has influenced historians, I don't know. I loathed *Big Brother* with a passion, and cannot abide Russell Brand. I did, though, have great fun watching reruns of the original *House of Cards* TV series, with Ian Richardson, and apply Althoff to it (which actually works rather nicely), and I am sufficiently aware politically to be wary of an emerging *Führerkult* in UK public and economic discourse (may be a German king, but I am wary of people celebrating leadership as a virtue in and of itself). This may well have provided an impetus to see how people who actually lived under kings tried to cope with them. What also caught my interest was the possibility to say

something about the interplay between the norms and the practice of power, and to work with often rather entertaining sources in the process. Whether similar motivations may have driven others, I do not know.

As to what a contemporary cultural context means for the role and perception of History: like most historians, I am a little concerned about what is happening to the History curriculum in the UK, especially the degree to which one individual – the secretary of state for education – has taken it upon himself to promote a vision of history that is a curious mixture of the sensible, the utterly ignorant, and the deeply prejudiced. Of course, what the SNP in Scotland has been doing to History education in Scottish schools is not *much* better, and the same goes for Wales. What we see is the reduction of History to a mere tool in pushing through a particular political agenda and vision of society, a means of fashioning communal identities, or at least of projecting as normative a particular vision of communal identity. That is not necessarily something new, but in the British case the approach is pursued with remarkably open contempt for the expertise of professional historians: just remember Michael Gove's utterly ill-informed attack on the *Historical Association*. But even on a less extreme level, Gordon Brown's awful book on heroes, for instance, or Tristram Hunt (the shadow education secretary) pilfering the past to justify his oddly anti-union leftism would fall in a similar category (he famously crossed a picket line to give a lecture on early Marxism).

How far this attitude reflects wider public views is difficult to say. The experience I had in talking to members of the general public seems to suggest we can be fairly optimistic: people are curious about the past, and keen to hear what we have to say. Obviously, there is an expectation that we say what happened – but then that is always the first step – but people are intelligent enough to realize that there will be debates, and they want to know why these debates exist. The problem is that the general public does not define the media and political environment within which we operate as historians. This was brought home when we had the British Academy conference I mentioned earlier. As the Academy receives its funding from the government, there had to be an impact element – in our case, a roundtable with heritage consultants and outreach officers. Somewhat ironically, the immediate

response of the general public was to vote with their feet, and to leave once the academic part of the conference concluded. What we then faced was a peculiar performance, in which we were told that in order to reach said general public we had to do local and family history, because that is what the public was interested in. Thankfully, the few non-academics who remained led the charge in response. The good news is that if we reach out to a general public, we will find allies and supporters. As one of the people who remained behind put it: "If I wanted to do family history, I can do that myself." The bad news is that this particular individual is not the one who will design government policy, AHRC funding guidelines, university strategic plans, or commission TV history series.

In general, then: there are risks. There is a danger that History – like all the humanities – will be reduced to being a mere means of identity fashioning. And there is considerable pressure pushing us in that direction. At the same time, we also have lots of friends and allies out there, and simply need to find ways of talking to them. Blogs will help, outreach events, institutions like the British Academy, and so on. Which, in a way, is also a good thing: I like talking to my peers, but I also think that topics like kingship or chronicles are far too interesting and exciting not to let a wider public know about them. And, who knows, this may also be a way of keeping the outreach officers at bay.

> 5. N&N: From your work on Matthew Paris backwards chronologically to Jamie Wood's research on Isidore of Seville, re-imagining great literary figures as important historians has been a growing trend. *What do you attribute this to, and what do you envision, or hope for, as the outcome of this turn?*

Prof. Weiler: It seems to me that we are dealing with three overlapping strands of enquiry. First, historians are increasingly aware – and make use – of the literary dimension of historical writing. Second, one cannot look at someone like Isidore without also noticing the degree to which he drew on the past, and to which he utilized it to define and understand the present. To this could be added a broader understanding of what constitutes historical writing. The reason all this seems so

innovative may have a lot to do with the concerns of an early generation of historians: to some extent, what mattered to them was trying to figure out what actually happened – which, by the way, is a perfectly valid question to ask. In that sense, one also needed sources that were reliable and accurate, and judging the reliability of sources for the kind of question in which historians were interested thus became key. A lot of the stuff we find intriguing was thus viewed as superfluous or distracting: miracles, the supernatural, the bizarre anecdote, the invented past, and so on. This is not meant to denigrate those earlier efforts: ultimately, we may disagree with the interpretation past generations of historians put on texts, but in all too many cases we are still dependent on the spadework they have done in dating, listing, and editing sources (well, unless they dealt with hagiographical texts). We simply ask different questions.

We should at the same time not exaggerate the novelty of more recent approaches. Helmut Beumann, writing in the 1950s, did excellent work on using historical writing as a source for ideals and images of kingship, and Frantisek Graus did so in the 1970s. The German tradition of *Kulturgeschichte* really does play quite an important role in this development too (thinking of Hans-Werner Goetz and how he transformed the concept, or Sverre Bagge). Still, something changed, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The theory wars may have had something to do with this, but so may have the need to find new methods and approaches to unlock the potential of our sources. In this context, a lot of very important work was done by scholars working on the Early Middle Ages: Walter Goffart, Jinty Nelson, Martin Heinzelmann, to name but a few, who revisited historical writing and revitalized its study. A key feature of these approaches was to look at historical writing as something constructed, as a narrative that availed itself of the devices of literary composition. Even if one may not always agree with Goffart's conclusions, the methodology he employed in reading texts was something quite interesting and refined and worthwhile. Furthermore, and this builds on something David Bates mentioned at this year's Leeds IMC (2014), we have moved beyond taking seeming misrepresentations of the past to be mere propaganda, and have started to read these texts as work of history, with authors making a point, struggling to access sources, etc. This tallies with a more general attempt to place these narratives in their

contemporary cultural context. Someone like William of Malmesbury, for instance (who wrote c. 1125) may look proto-Rankean in his attempts to sift through archives, query eye-witnesses, describe monuments etc., but he was also clearly and undeniably a twelfth-century Benedictine monk. Some of his modern readers could find that rather irritating, and there have been quite striking attempts to write the religious out of Malmesbury. Yet if we accept that he included miracles, portents, and the supernatural for reasons other than trying to appease his more religious-minded contemporaries (as has indeed been suggested), with William a kind of twentieth-century rationalist trapped in the body of a twelfth-century monk, his writings suddenly make a lot more sense, while also allowing us to ask much broader questions about intellectual and historical culture, the role of politics, identity formation, and so on.

As to desired outcomes: first, there will, one hopes, be a broader engagement with how past societies dealt with their past. I find the concept of historical culture quite useful in this context – basically, the sum of actions and media with which communities or individuals viewed and debated the past. That could include material as well as written culture, historical narratives in the broadest sense, but also liturgical materials, sermon collections, and more self-consciously fictional representations of the past. Dealing with these materials cannot, though, be an end in itself (that author x, in writing about the past, constructed it, would be a rather trite conclusion). If, as we generally accept, historians reflect currents (even if they may be contradictory currents) in contemporary culture, then the way in which the past was debated and written about also tells us something about the wider intellectual culture of a society, group, region, etc. Historical writing, in turn, had a wider reach and more examples of it survive than was the case with many other genres of text. We thus can trace broader and different debates more easily. The second outcome is perhaps a more traditional one. It is great fun to try and figure out textual strategies. Yet we should not forget that texts also reflect contemporary realities, refracted as they may have been through several layers of interpretation. We may no longer read chronicles as if they were news agency reports, but this does not mean they cannot be used to get a sense of social realities. Tim Reuter's work on feuding and peace-keeping is a classic example as to how this may be done. And

there may be other types of social reality that can be traced: communication networks, the sources of information and patronage, social and cultural hierarchies, and so on. In short, then, dealing with the narrativity of historical writing should not be an end in itself, but a potential tool with which wider questions can be asked.

N&N response: You rightly point out the need to remain aware of the subjectivity of our own positions, their relationship to previous trends in scholarship, and the dangers of anachronism in historical research (trying to 'modernize' medieval writers). You are very clear in historicizing approaches to reading historical texts. *I wonder, what do you think will be the next big 'turn' in history and historiography? Is another major turn on the horizon?*

Furthermore, what do you think of the growth over the past decade of the return to the objective in the humanities, in particular via the work of the speculative realists like Quentin Meillassoux (and the concept of factualité), and the somewhat return to Plato in the Humanities? In postmodernism, all reality is discursive, there are no truths and the 'real' cannot be thought. All that can be thought is the discourse, the language, by which we are in effect trapped – discourse can find discourse, but not (historical) truth – and all of which be accounted for methodologically. In 'speculative realism', scholars refute post-modernism and post-structuralism. In contrast to the 'postmods' they argue that the 'real'/truth is thinkable, and that thought can access the 'immanent'. This is done through a sort of 'non-philosophy' or 'anti-philosophy' that transcends and subtracts from orthodoxies of thought (philosophies, theologies, etc.) to grapple with the motivating factors behind texts. *I wonder, must the objective and subjective, modern and postmodern, be trapped in a dialectical relationship, or can a third alternative emerge, not a synthesis of the two, but something radically different? A radical new turn equivalent to what Mommsen and Ranke, and then Goffart and Nelson, helped to develop?*

Prof. Weiler response: I am afraid I have not read Meillassoux (which I will rectify forthwith). As far as Ranke or Mommsen are concerned, we need to keep in mind

that Ranke simply applied to history the principles and methods he had learned in his training as a philologist (which kind of makes the Rankean the real linguistic turn). Nelson and Goffart similarly built on and developed further an approach to history that predated them (Kosseleck, Graus, Beumann, and so on). So I am not sure what we will see is a huge *Urknall* type event, but the gradual emergence of a set of approaches that will slowly cohere into something quite new and different. We also need to keep in mind that History as a discipline has become much more fragmented – medievalists, for instance, may (and certainly should) look up to Nelson and Goffart, but I have modernist colleagues who are quite well informed about periods other than their own, and who have an interest in medieval history, who have never heard of either. Medievalists, in turn, may well have missed the last big turn in modern history.

6. N&N: You teach a course titled 'Historians & the Writing of History'. Next year marks the fortieth anniversary of Michel de Certeau's *L'Ecriture de l'Histoire* and Michel Foucault's *Disciplin et Punir*, and, published just before them, Hayden White's *Metahistory*. *What do you see as the major developments in history-writing since this pivotal moment in the field? What do you see as the future of history-writing?*

Prof. Weiler: I do have rather a soft spot for Foucault: to paraphrase one of my colleagues, his archival research was shoddy, most of his interpretations are verifiably wrong, some of his concepts (like 'power') are never defined, but the questions he asked are fundamentally important, and have greatly advanced the discipline. Like Hayden White and de Certeau, he must, though, be viewed as part of a particular intellectual milieu, a specific moment in time, with his views framed, among by, among other factors, the rise of the New Left in France, the Vietnam war, the Pompidou restoration and the rise of neoliberal economics, etc. Foucault and White (de Certeau is trickier) also formed part of a broader leftist ferment, with the rise of feminist approaches to history, organisations like History Workshop, or *La Rosca* in Colombia. I would also argue that works like Natalie Zemon Davies' *Fiction in the Archives* (1987) or Carlo Ginzburg's *Cheese and the Worms* (1976) probably had a greater impact on the discipline. And many of these, in turn, were influenced by

anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins or Jack Goody rather than literary studies (White) – the same, incidentally, is true of medieval scholarship, where anthropological approaches had a far more profound impact on people like Tim Reuter, Gerd Althoff, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Jacques LeGoff, and so on. Even now, a book like Karen Barber's *Anthropology of texts* (while itself influenced by 1980s literary studies), and perhaps some sociology (Jeffrey Winters' *Oligarchy*; James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*; and, of course, Pierre Bourdieu) will prove far more useful to historians than Homi Bhaba. And we should not forget some of the homegrown, so to speak, conceptual tools, most notably Kosselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, which also predates de Certeau and Foucault, but which raised similar questions.

As far as the future is concerned, historians make bad fortune-tellers. What seems to be happening at the moment, perhaps also driven by a renewed awareness of the materiality of the past, is a return to an engagement with realities beyond the text, though with an array of rather more finely tuned conceptual tools. This can be seen in recent work, for instance, on the manuscript context of historical writing (how did people actually read, understand and use history?), but also a revived interest in legal and administrative history, or the history of the environment, treating it as something people conceptualised at least in part because it had a very clear and palpable impact on their everyday existence. The same way kingship became interesting because nobody had looked at it and new methods were available, now legal and administrative history is experiencing an incipient revival, though in a way that many of the classic practitioners of the field would have found difficult to anticipate. History may have emerged victorious from the Theory Wars, but it did not emerge unchanged (and there still are quite a few historians who think Ranke was a dangerous postmodernist). There may even have been a return to grand narratives, especially in modern history – Jürgen Osterhammel springs to mind on the nineteenth century, or James Belich on British imperialism. Yet the way topics are approached, the way sources are analysed, what is deemed worth exploring and considering, has changed. Just compare Osterhammel to some of the classic histories of the nineteenth century written in the 1970s and 1980s, and you will notice the difference.

Another key element in this change may be a greater willingness to take a global perspective. With that I do not mean global history (which, in its curiously monoglott outlook, remains oddly provincial), but awareness that medieval (or modern) Europe formed part of a much wider world. That also poses challenges as to how that history can be written. On a most elementary level, one of the reasons we do not have a complete history of the Mongol Empire, for instance, is because no single human being can acquire all the medieval and modern languages needed to do so (unless they claim to write 'global history', in which case they only need English). Furthermore, concepts can mean very different things in different cultural contexts: I noticed this when involved in a project on political culture in Byzantium, Islam and the West, where we spent quite a few years just trying to come up with a conceptual framework that allowed us, first, to identify specificities, and, second, to compare. There will be many more collaborative efforts, as in Pekka Hämäläinen's Oxford project on nomadic empires, or the one Michal Birhan at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and others are running on the comparative history of empires. In the medium term, it would be great to train up a generation of historians who have the language skills to work on more than one region of the globe, though they will always remain a relatively small group. Until then, it would be quite a success just to get specialists to talk to each other, to figure out working models, and create a general expectation that the history of a particular region ought to be viewed in a broader global context.

Finally, there are the digital humanities, which at present are a bit of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, there is immense room to develop new methodologies and questions – databases, interactive maps, text archives, electronic editions of texts, etc. These tools also offer new opportunities, for instance, in training graduate students, in collaborating and creating networks of scholars. Electronic publishing also offers some intriguing possibilities (electronic text editions are probably where these tools will be most useful: much easier to show up manuscript variants, for instance, cross-references etc.). On the downside, some digital humanities scholars seem to suffer from a somewhat technocratic neo-positivism, the belief that having countable and computer-verifiable data makes obsolete the process of reflection and interpretation.

In this sense, they act a bit like the cliometricians of the 1960s (tediously dull, statistics based history, seeking to reduce everything to measurable data - probably one factor why Foucault seemed like such a welcome breath of fresh air).

N&N response: About the relative influence of Rancière, de Certeau, White or Bhaba on the history profession, versus that of social scientists, you are very well correct, and that is unfortunate, I believe. For me, science, including social science, can answer all sorts of questions, but it can never answer 'why', which is the main question, I think, of humanities research. You say that sociological and anthropological approaches "will prove far more useful to historians than Homi Bhaba", or by implication, Hayden White or Michel Foucault. *Why do you think social science and analytical approaches to history are more fruitful for the historian?*

Prof. Weiler response: Remember that I did argue Foucault's questions had an immense (and positive) impact on history. I have read Bhaba, and find the concept of the 'third space' intriguing. It is just that, had I not seen Bhaba in the flesh and had I thus not been put in a position where I can state with a considerable degree of confidence that Homi Bhaba is an objective and verifiable reality, I would wonder whether he (or rather his prose) was not the product of Alan Sokal's imagination. I obviously agree with White that embracing the narrativity of history can be useful — it is just that, as Arthur Marwick pointed out, his approach was honed in relation to nineteenth-century historians before the development of modern academic history. It is like developing a theory of history as practiced by you and me that takes its samples from ninth-century Francia: there are certain recurrent issues and practices, but we both approach writing about the past quite differently from Einhard or Nithard (at least I hope we do). Though, to be fair to White, the problem probably rests less with him than some of the people who used his model without questioning it.

As to why analytical approaches are more useful: I would approach the issue differently. Geertz, Bourdieu, and others are interested in very similar questions to the ones historians tend to ask: how did societies function? What was the role of ritual, for instance, in the development of Balinese kingship? How did bureaucrats

think about themselves? And they develop a model that can be tested – Geertz, in turns out, works in neither nineteenth-century Bali nor medieval Europe, but he provided an interesting route towards tackling the problem, while Bourdieu has developed concepts – such as 'habitus' – that, with some modification, are actually rather useful analytical tools for writing about high medieval elites. History is more than just testing their models, but their models give us a means of approaching the evidence, and asking the important question (as you rightly said) of 'why'?

Though, I would also add, most scientists (and the better social scientists) would dispute that they are not asking 'why'. In fact, the 'why' question is essential in sciences – just as history is about more than simply listing dates, so experimental science is about more than recording experiments. With social sciences, matters can be a little bit more complicated: they can be horribly doctrinaire (and, somewhat ironically, are much more theory driven than history – Agamben and Foucault are big in human geography and social anthropology, I gather), and there can be a tendency to develop neat models that do not actually fit any concrete situation anywhere ever. Historians, by contrast, need to be aware of the fact that they deal with the messiness of human experience. Humans rarely act in a wholly coherent and predictable fashion, and no two human communities are wholly alike – in fact, singling out the specific and the particular is a key feature of what historians do, and we are habitually wary of generalizing beyond a carefully circumscribed time and place. Even Benedict Anderson, for instance, did not claim that what he described worked outside Indonesia. I do not necessarily see that as a problem, but it does mean that social sciences can provide something that the work of other historians will normally not: a coherent model that can be used as a point of departure for exploring the specific and the particular. That is, of course, also why bringing together historians with very different areas of geographical and chronological expertise is important: sometimes, the specific is not so much specific in and of itself, as that it constitutes a particular variation on a more common theme. And that, in turn, allows for much more interesting 'why' questions to be asked.

> 7. N&N: A central topic throughout your research is, we might say,
> medieval philosophy of history. You are engaged deeply in questions of

how medieval people thought about 'the past', how history was performed, and what this implies about the meaning of history-writing and historiography in the period. *How, would you say, history was conceived of in the period? For example, was history thought of as a singular space-time of 'the past', or a 'before now' with a diverse plurality of (competing) timelines? To what extent was attachment to a particular past a form of cultural capital? Moreover, did historical 'acting-out' (to use Dominick LaCapra's term) reflect realities, nostalgias or future utopias? Did people care about the past for reasons other than 'identity' and religion: was history a 'strategy' for other forms of distinction?*

Prof. Weiler: As you suggest, I do not think there was one unified theory of history and historical writing. A lot depended on the genre of a text, on tradition, availability of models, the individual author, etc. The same goes for concepts of time – with the important exception that there seems to have been a clear linear run from the Creation to the Second Coming, with various high points in between, most notably the birth of Christ. Whether this brought with it a sense of the past being different from the present is a tricky question, and difficult to answer in general terms. There was, for instance, the 'good old times' trope, when things were better in the past, when writing about it meant describing an ideal *status quo ante* that had to be restored, or that at least should be looked at as a model to emulate. Alternatively, the present could constitute a huge improvement over the past, but normally did so by implementing more fully an ideal *status quo ante* imagined to have existed before the immediate, most recent past. Third, the past could be simply a source of precedent, of models to invoke, and of actions to judge by the moral criteria of an author, his audience, peers or patrons. Nancy Partner described this quite aptly as 'serious entertainment', with history meant to provide a basic outline of events, but above all a set of models to contemplate. Finally, history would lead up to the end of days: not as a utopia to be desired, but as the natural endpoint of human history. In that context, a knowledge of history, of good and bad behavior, could prepare a writer's audience for the final reckoning, give them an opportunity to get their house in order before it was too late.

We would also need to consider the users of history. Writers like William of Malmesbury or Hugh of St Victor may have thought a lot about what history was and how it was meant to be written, but they were quite unusual in doing so, and they tell us little about what those reading or consulting their manuscripts would have expected to gain from doing so. At present, the evidence remains fragmentary, but some recent work seems to suggest that readers in the high Middle Ages took a rather utilitarian, almost positivist approach to reading history: they wanted to know what actually happened, and how things were really done in the past. Similarly, there is an emerging Danish school of scholars looking at historical writing and its relationship with the liturgy – which makes sense, considering how many historians were also cantors, i.e. the individuals in charge of the liturgy. Nicholas Paul, in turn, has done outstanding work on crusading and family memory, with the memorialization of the past, driven by a complex interplay between the producers and the sponsors or recipients of history, a major theme. How exactly these various strands of scholarship unfold will be interesting to see. In any case, we will have to revisit some quite knotty problems about truthfulness and verisimilitude, for instance, the relationship between author and audience, etc.

Finally, historical writing could, of course, help individuals and communities acquire cultural capital in ways that extended beyond religion and identity formation. It set a precedent, for instance. It could distinguish one community from another. It could be a source of prestige, both by commissioning, and by producing historical narratives (writing dynastic histories could, for instance, be a means of forging closer links with lay patrons, or of soliciting their renewed patronage). The latter could, for instance, include the Icelanders of the twelfth and thirteenth century, famous (or infamous) across Scandinavia as writers of history. Yet we also know that, with a few exceptions, most medieval monasteries never developed anything like a communal tradition of historical writing: once the past had been recorded, that was it, until people though a text was too old-fashioned or otherwise no longer usable, and commissioned a new version. That attitude, in turn, has implications for our understanding of how history works as a source of cultural capital for the producers of history.

N&N response: After the lengthy, multi-part question, a short follow-up one: *how wide of a category do you imagine 'history-writing' to be?*

Prof. Weiler response: In a medieval context, anything that dealt with the past. That would obviously be chronicles and annals, but also saints' lives, foundation legends, liturgical texts, and so on. Even legal and administrative texts could fall into that category. Where it gets tricky is literary narratives – in a way, the Charlemagne cycle deals with historical events, and any study of historical culture would definitely have to include this kind of material. Though I am not sure how far the authors themselves would have described their texts as 'history' in a sense that would have been accepted by Isidore of Seville or Gervase of Canterbury. Authors like Geoffrey of Monmouth also do not help: why would we use Saxo Grammaticus just because he also dealt with verifiable events after having largely made up and invented most of his history of the Danes, and at the same time exclude Geoffrey from consideration? This brings us back to issues of verisimilitude and narrativity, and what contemporaries would have expected history to be (the evidence concerning Geoffrey is complex and contradictory). We may have to accept that high medieval definitions of historical writing were somewhat broader than our own. How much of a problem that is will depend on the questions in which one is interested: if I want to find out what happened in sixth century Britain, Geoffrey is useless; if, on the other hand, I want to explore how people in the twelfth-century imagined the distant past, he is a goldmine. In either case, I need to be aware that the sources may have been written according to very different conventions from the ones in which I have been trained.

8. N&N: Given that there was a plurality of historical consciousness in the period, I would argue that it is especially incumbent upon medieval historians to engage the philosophy of history, in order not to totalize that medieval experience into the singularizing and non-emotive language of modern (even postmodern) history-

writing. *To what extent do you think medieval historians should be conversant in theories and philosophies of history? Do historians currently have the 'language' to represent the history of the medieval past?*

Prof. Weiler: I would be a little more pragmatic as to the first point: half-way decent historians always reflect on what they are doing. Are we, for instance, unduly superimposing modern concepts onto the past? We can, of course, see patterns and structures that contemporaries may not have perceived, but also need to be aware that these patterns may be rooted in lack of evidence, or the survival of particular types of evidence. Similarly, medievalists perhaps more so than their modernist colleagues, need to use imagination and guesswork to fill gaps in the evidence, and that makes thinking about one's own preconceptions all the more important. In this context, being methodologically literate is fundamentally important. And methodological literacy means the intelligent and self-reflective use of theoretical approaches often developed in other disciplines or for different time periods. Theory remains a tool, not a straightjacket: it may open up new ways of approaching the evidence, may allow us to ask different questions, but we also need to be aware that theories are themselves historically contingent. Even the best theory will not wholly fit a period or problem other than the one in relation to which it had initially been conceived. The questions we need to ask are: are the underpinning questions compatible with the evidence and society we study; what gains for understanding a period, piece of evidence, or problem can be had from posing these questions; and how far could the points where a theory ceases to apply be used as staring points for exploring the distinctiveness or peculiarities of a specific problem/period/text?

As to the second point: of course we are separated by a considerable chronological as well as conceptual, cultural and linguistic gulf from the period we study. We lack much of the cultural context within which our sources were produced. But then, even if we were fully conversant in 'medieval' (of which there existed many different versions), our role is still that of being a mediator, of trying to communicate an understanding of the past to an audience that does not have the same level of training (students, general readers, a wider public). In short, we would still have to translate the past into terms that are accessible to the present. Faced with this

dilemma, we could simply give up and write fiction instead. Or pen playful little pieces that display our command of one or another theoretical approach, but which will be of absolutely no use whatsoever to anybody else. Neither seems appealing. We can, alternatively, employ a series of conceptual and methodological tools to visualize and conceptualise the initial gulf. And once we know what the likely problems with our conceptual vantage point may be, we may even be able to do something about them. No historian who is any good at the job would claim that his/her reconstruction of the past offers a full and accurate depiction of past reality in its entirety (I think Ranke said something similar). But what we can do is attempt a plausible reconstruction, based on the surviving evidence, denoting what we have selected and why, and what we have left out; clearly taking account of alternative interpretations; highlight areas where we have to draw on our imagination or other interpretative tools; but otherwise draw conclusions that may not always be wholly verifiable (or falsifiable), but that can at least be debated, and refined or modified in the process. In that sense, yes, we do have the conceptual language to write about periods other than our own.

N&N response: I agree that history-writing that is singularly devoted to one particular interpretive framework, 'one or another theoretical approach' as you say, is problematic. However, to continue playing devil's advocate, I wonder, *is not a conscious attempt at 'objective' and 'factual' reconstruction similarly dogmatic?*

Prof. Weiler response: I do not think any historians worth their money would claim that they write 'objective' history. We cannot. We do not have the evidence to start with, and we cannot represent the abundance of things that happened simultaneously, quite apart from the fact that we are embedded within our own distinct culture discourses and practices. Similarly, a purely factual history would be dry as dust: it would be a list of dates and names and places and little else. There always will be a degree of selection and interpretation in any study of history worth the paper on which it is printed (or whatever the pixel equivalent may be). It is just that I dislike the defeatism that a strictly postmodern approach would involve, and

the degree to which it postulates an extreme hyper-positivism as desirable, even normative: as we cannot prove our readings with absolute certainty, it seems to suggest, we should give up even trying. If we accepted that, nobody would ever have sought to strive beyond what he or she could do already, nobody would ever have speculated about doing things they knew were not possible, and so on. We would still live in caves and wonder where the mammoths had gone. Except we would not discuss mammoths, as nobody could prove with absolute certainty why they had disappeared.

The key underlying issue, though, is that of respect for the past, a kind of moral obligation towards the people we are writing about. Historians, after all, deal with what were once real, living and breathing human beings. To treat them as mere textual constructs to be interpreted at will means depriving them of that humanity, and is morally questionable. We may get things wrong, misread motivations, misunderstand the testimony left behind, and we face the problem that we will never be able to reconstruct a past world in its entirety. We do, however, owe it to these people that we at least try to understand the world in which they lived, that we take seriously the evidence they left behind, that we do not knowingly distort what remains of their lives and hopes, that we do not invent views and actions that we would wish had taken place, but for which no evidence exists. Our tools for achieving these aims are imperfect, but this does not mean that they cannot be refined and improved, and that new tools cannot be developed (which is why historians should always be willing to explore new techniques). It is a case of doing the best we can, even if the results will never be perfect. Personally, I would be quite happy to settle for 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

There also is the question as to what History is meant to accomplish. I would argue that it is about trying to understand how past societies might have functioned, how people might have thought and felt about the world around them. Again, we can never be certain that our readings and renditions of that world are wholly correct, but if we make things up entirely, if we invent and distort, then that pushes us even further away from any possible understanding of the past. Writing History is not

about displaying the cleverness of the historian, but about trying to make sense of what remains of past human lives.

> 9. N&N: Pierre Bourdieu imagined cultural capital as a dense network of sub-terraneous and superficial characteristics and features inherent to individuals and groups. Each has its own latent and expressed forms of variegated capital to potentially deploy. In the study of the Middle Ages, European universities and scholars hold tremendous cultural capital and resources in relation to our 'global' colleagues. *What do you think are the benefits, consequences, and perhaps dangers of international collaborations of scholars, particularly between European scholars and institutes with those outside of the EU?*

Prof. Weiler: Part of the cultural capital of European universities is, of course, their proximity to the evidence. Little can be done about that (I am sure European colleagues working on China, for instance, face an equivalent phenomenon). I also do not see any reason why the European Middle Ages cannot be studied by scholars from outside Europe (in fact, Americans, Australians and New Zealanders have been doing a pretty good job of it). Such collaboration could also result in some quite intriguing outside perspectives (though there is also always the danger that the poor Japanese or Chinese medievalist who wants to research Europe will continuously be pressured to do something comparative on Europe and Asia).

N&N response: I certainly agree that international collaboration is an enriching and rewarding experience, both for the scholarship and the scholars involved. *Networks and Neighbours* works particularly with colleagues in Brazil, Chile and Argentina, and I think I can speak for everyone involved that the results have been fantastic, in terms of the collaborative efforts and individual intellectual engagements. *I wonder, though, given the various forms of capital European scholars and institutions hold, do you think there is a danger of European scholars and institutes forcing/embedding European interpretations of its past onto discourse about it around the world?* This would, of course,

somewhat deflate the purpose of international collaboration, and be a form of academic colonialism.

Prof. Weiler response: I think we have to be careful not to paint colleagues at non-Western institutions as mere pawns. Yes, there can be pressure on non-Western colleagues who work on their home region at Western institutions to adopt a particular form of discourse that is sometimes in striking contrast to how they wrote history before coming to the West. I gather that African and South Asian historians in particular find this quite irritating at times. On the other hand, Romila Thapar, for instance, the grand old dame of medieval Indian history, while gaining her doctorate from SOAS in London, seemed quite capable, on returning to Delhi, to break free from Western conventions of writing about India. Her work on Indian historical culture and historical writing remains groundbreaking in outlining a specifically northern Indian way of engaging with the past, and to put to rest that old chestnut that pre-colonial Indians did not have history, simply because they did not write in the manner in which nineteenth-century Europeans would have written it. Just because non-Western historians may work at universities without the cultural capital of Western institutions, this does not mean that they lack intellectual and academic agency.

Matters could be slightly different as regards how people outside the West write about medieval Europe. To be honest, I do not know enough non-Western medievalists to be able to comment. I have read the work of some Chinese and Japanese colleagues writing in European languages, and what struck me was that some (though clearly not all) of it could be remarkably old-fashioned: there seemed to be little concern at times with the methodological issues we discussed earlier. I do not know how far this reflects academic conventions in China and Japan, and how far it may simply have to do with the availability of secondary sources, or the preferences of individual authors. Though I do feel mischievous enough to suggest as a mere possibility the idea that post-structuralism and post-modernism could be construed as a form of Western academic colonialism.

A much more pressing issue will probably be access to primary and secondary sources. I gather that even Japanese colleagues – and there are about 500 medievalists working on Europe at Japanese universities – sometimes find it difficult to get key journals and books. I can only guess what this must be like for the much smaller community of medievalists in Latin America or even China. I would imagine www.academia.edu will help, as does *Networks & Neighbours*. The Middle East would constitute an intriguing case study, as interaction with the Western world in the Middle Ages was obviously a rather more frequent phenomenon there than in Asia or – for obvious reasons – Latin America, but I do not know enough about Arabic or Farsi scholarship on medieval Europe. It seems, though, that Turkish universities tend to hire Western medievalists to teach Western Medieval History, which would, of course, have intriguing implications for the issues you raise. Still, generally I would suspect that the danger of academic colonialism in Medieval Studies in the sense that you outlined it is rather remote.

> 10. N&N: That brings me to the question of Open-Access. There are a lot of valid criticisms of the Open-Access project, for example, that it devalues Humanities labor, thereby 'legitimizing' decreases in funding. *What are your thoughts on Open-Access, and on the future of Humanities publishing?*

Prof. Weiler: I like the principle of OA, but am rather concerned about current UK practice. For the next REF (the periodic assessment of research production and quality) in 2020, only items that are available open access – either on the gold route (instant OA) or green (rolling window or an institutional depository) – can be submitted. Monographs and items in edited collections are, for the moment, exempt from this rule, though there have been some disconcerting noises about abolishing the green route altogether. The key problem is that, while commercial publishers have certainly exploited their oligopoly, Humanities do not quite suffer the same problems as the natural sciences: we do not have journals that cost £10,000 p.a. (even the *Journal of Medieval History* only comes to about £350, and that is one of the most expensive ones we have, with most in the region of £100-150). As a result, the current system of OA not only tackles a non-existing problem, but creates one

that is far more serious and potentially devastating than the one it purports to address. To begin, gold OA is expensive: publication charges range from £800-1000 per piece, at least in reputable outlets. This could mean that just one article in a peer reviewed OA journal will cost almost as much as the subscription rate for that journal for the entire REF period. Now multiply that – cautiously – by 2 (journal articles per person per REF) by number of academic staff, and you will realize just how expensive this will be. There is a reason, incidentally, why there has been a mushrooming of very dubious outfits soliciting submissions for gold OA. In a working market, if all journals went gold OA, the cost should go down, though probably still to a not inconsiderable £300-500 (so, 2-3 years subscription per journal, rather than 4-5). The problem is, of course, that the reason we have the debate over OA is that the academic publishing market no longer works (if it did, Elsevier and Springer would not have year on year [rather than one-off] profit margins of 30%), and I would thus be very pessimistic about publications rates going down if green OA were abolished.

What concerns me are the practical implications this could have, especially if green OA is indeed under threat. Library budgets will be even tighter. There will be less funding to buy monographs and books (so we will squeeze out the medium sized publishers, not subsidized by journal publishing), and we will probably end up in a system where – especially first time – authors will have to pay to have their books published (some publishers already demand £1500 subsidies from recent PhDs). On the surface, this will not be very different from the French or German academic publishing market, *except* that, in France and Germany, a) funding is more generous, b) a funding infrastructure for academic publishing is well established, and c) there is much stronger academic involvement in deciding how the money is spent (and I will come back to this). The only ones to gain from the new system are the big publishing conglomerates, which can charge for both subscription and publication. OA, in this sense, is a bit like post-2008 UK banking reform, in that it subsidises many of those who have caused the current mess in the first place.

All of which has two further implications. First, unless research is externally funded (or authors are independently wealthy), academics might find it difficult to publish

their work. Except, of course, that the AHRC does not include publication costs in its funding (quite apart from the ever decreasing levels of funding for humanities research). Which means that, second, universities will have to draw on central budgets to subsidize publication. More worryingly, this could well mean that decisions as to what gets published will be taken out of the hands of academic staff, and passed into those of university managers and administrators (as has happened already at some institutions). Even if the decision remains within departments, there is unlikely to be enough funding for everyone to publish without the agreement of their colleagues. In many cases that may work okay, but there also are enough institutions where this will be viewed as a means of disciplining staff or of pushing particular research agendas, inevitably to the exclusion of others. Gold OA in its present form reduces academic freedom, and thus undermines the ability of academics to develop new or unpopular areas of research. It will dampen research activity, not encourage it. And let us not even talk what this means for PhD students or early career scholars. I hope this will prove an unduly dystopian prognosis, but fear it is also worryingly realistic.

Again, we could just give up and start breeding dachshunds professionally or go into organic farming. On one level, we certainly need to fight what gold OA means at the moment. The German and French governments have, unsurprisingly, been rather more commonsensical about the issue, and instituted a policy where publications that come out of a publicly funded research project have to be available green OA within a three year rolling window (which would not work in natural sciences, but most humanities scholarship has a shelf life that extends beyond three years). And we will need to be creative. Initiatives like *Networks & Neighbours* may prove very useful indeed – though I would be intrigued to know how it is funded. Similar initiatives exist in *e-spania*, *concilium medii aevii*, or *tabularia*, though many of those lack broader international reach, marketing, and so on. Print-on-demand publishing may also help – I know of colleagues in London who have started publishing conference proceedings online, and who will charge just above cost for actually quite nicely produced hardcover copies of these proceedings. These initiatives will still require some level of financial support (if a journal or book series works out, staff will be needed to do the formatting, deal with billing, maintain the electronic infrastructure,

do the marketing etc.), but that could be more easily accomplished when several institutions work together. This could still mess up learned societies – who draw a lot of their income from selling their publications – but it would provide a means with which to realize at least some of the promise of OA without suffering the horrors of the current system. I could even imagine a list of journals, listing the price per page, and organisations like the AHA, the British Academy, or the Royal Historical Society encouraging their members to boycott those journals that charge excessive subscription rates, or that raise their prices significantly above inflation. I also do not see why the electronic and the hardcopy version of a journal should cost the same (there is no postage, no printing or storage expenditure for the latter – though there will still be, of course, editing, marketing, maintaining the electronic presence, etc.), or the excessive mark-up for institutional as opposed to personal subscriptions. Whatever we do, the key will be to restore some competition, while simultaneously encouraging something like green OA as normative.

N&N response: Firstly, I should point out, as you imply, that *Networks & Neighbours* is 'Open-Access' *not* according to British institutional and governmental definitions: we are completely free for authors and readers. There are other 'OA' journals like this in the Humanities, such as the journal of *Badiou Studies*. This is also based out of the University of Leeds, a developing hotbed for new forms of academic publishing. Now, you and I disagree a bit on some issues of theoretical and philosophical approaches, but in terms of OA, I agree completely with your interpretations and concerns. I think that the new institutional forms of OA – which charge authors to publish – are a step backwards, in terms of the free exchange of scholarly ideas, and a step forward in the privatization of academia and the closing-off of higher education to the wider society. It is also a step-forward, I would argue, in the 'scientification' of the Humanities (making us function like, and part of, the hard sciences, and so legitimate in a market sense). Charging authors to publish represents, I believe, another very transparent logic: those who have the financial resources, or patrons to support them, are those who deserve to be heard, the rest are not. Moreover, these preferred voices should be freely read and heard by all: everyone should listen, freely and abundantly, to those with the financial capital to speak. However you interpret this ethically or politically, it is certainly contrary to

any notion of the free exchange of ideas and encouragement of wide participation in academic and intellectual life. *In an unexpected twist, I wonder if, then, some traditional forms of publication are, in fact, today's avant-garde? Do you think there is another, as-of-yet-untried possibility?*

Finally, I'd like to answer your question about how the *Networks & Neighbours* journal is funded, the answer to which will also address your comment on new types of printing. The journal *Networks & Neighbours* is wholly free online, but it is also sold as print-on-demand. All proceeds from print-on-demand sales will be returned directly to the journal, and used for running *free* academic events. We founded the journal, back in 2012, completely from the money in our pockets, but now the costs involved with the website and printed volumes are covered by our publisher, Punctum Books. In exchange, we split the proceeds 50/50 with Punctum, who is an OA publisher in the U.S., not bound by any European definitions of the 'OA'. Punctum is, like us, totally free, for authors and readers, and its director would, she has confirmed, never charge authors to publish. Print copies are sold on demand, but the pdfs are free online. I should point out too that Punctum was founded, and is led, by a fellow early medieval historian.

Prof. Weiler response: I like the idea that current UK OA policy echoes *Citizen United* and *Hobby Lobby*: those who have the money to make themselves heard shall be heard, and those who can afford to force their beliefs on others can do so. Though I think you may be a bit unfair on the poor scientists: most of the ones I know, especially if they do not do applied research, would share our concerns.

I also like the *Networks & Neighbours* model, and what Punctum is doing. Traditional forms of publishing as avant-garde: I would not necessarily go that far – some of the ridiculous pricing of academic books by university presses is just scandalous (they are charities, they own their warehouses [so do not need to charge the cost of storage], etc.). On the other hand, yes, publication by learned societies may well be a way forward (except that many of them surrendered their journal publishing to commercial conglomerates): rigorously academic, partially funded by subscription, and easily available (the [Viking Society for Northern Research](#) is exemplary in this

respect). I would not have a problem with paying a small fee to cover marketing and editing that would allow early access for subscribers, for instance. But I would imagine that we cannot really get past the need for identifiable journals and book series, at least not for quite some time. Paul Ginsperg, a physicist at Cornell, helped develop an online OA database of draft articles, with open peer review and so on. Even there, most papers then get published in standard journals. A lot of this has to do with reach and with a clearly identified editorial remit: if I send something to *Viator* it is more likely to be read than if I post it on academia.edu, and I will more easily find papers that will interest me in the journal (though I like the random gems *academia* can show up). Similarly, a book published by CUP or OUP will be more widely distributed than if it is placed in an institutional repository, while I also have a good idea of their editorial policy and what I can expect them to publish. I also do not have the time to edit draft papers online and check every few weeks to see what has been changed, or what comments may have been added. This does not mean, though, that online journals and book series cannot in due (and hopefully not too distant) course give established outfits a run for their money. The sooner they do so, in fact, the better. There probably will need to be some fee involved (as I said, editing, marketing, maintaining the web page etc.), but costs will be considerably lower, and ensuring green OA will not be a problem.

11. N&N: *What do you think of the development of new forms and institutions of higher education, such as the European Graduate School and the Global Center for Advanced Studies? Could small, specialized (post-)graduate universities* – with their ability to offer courses led by renowned scholars from around the globe, and flexibility to rapidly adapt their curricula and offer low (or no) tuition fees equally to all students regardless of their citizenships – *ultimately build an intellectually diverse environment that could out-class, or even replace, the Humanities research output of traditional institutions? Are they the future of Humanities education – including Medieval History – or is a symbiotic relationship between the two forms, or a third alternative, that which would have the most 'impact'?*

Prof. Weiler: What struck me is about EGS and GCAS is that both are ultimately dependent on established research institutions and universities to pay their academic staff, to maintain an infrastructure of buildings and support and libraries, and that none engage with the really expensive stuff like sciences. All of which makes charging low tuition relatively easy. Other issues also need pondering: I am very skeptical of a line of thinking that if you only get enough big names together, this will somehow transform the research culture of an institution or discipline. How much time do Atom Egoyan and Giorgio Agamben actually spend in the Pennine Alps? UK universities used to do something like that, and it hardly if ever made a difference – students did not see the big names, and the superstar's colleagues ended up having to do extra teaching while struggling to get a foot on the research ladder themselves. Of course you want to attract and keep good people, but so many other factors are important as well: research resources (libraries, availability of archives), research culture (an intellectual community), etc. Shoddy institutions hardly ever make great research centres or attract good students. I'm also a little bit worried that initiatives like these or MOOC will lead to the increasing proletarization of academe: a top layer of international research stars who occasionally pop round to see how their home institution is doing, and an army of underpaid academic minions who do the groundwork of teaching, und who can be dismissed at will. That's after all the only way in which you can have flexible and rapidly changing curricula. It could make being a junior academic a bit like working in an amazon warehouse or an i-pod factory.

Having said all that, there is, of course, a lot to be said for training and research collaboration that transcends institutional and national boundaries. And a variety of options are available – the new European degree schemes (with students moving between institutions), networks, old-fashioned summer schools (like the ones the CEU in Budapest tends to organise). And the web also offers a whole new range of tools and approaches. At Aberystwyth we are developing an MA programme in Anglo-Norman Studies, where students take a portfolio of classes taught from different campuses across Wales, the idea being that together the participating institutions have an unrivalled range and depth of expertise, with something really rather unique to offer. If this works, I cannot see why it should not be replicated

more broadly (and there are, of course, several European doctoral training programmes, like the ones bringing together Leeds, Cambridge, Utrecht and Vienna). They all have in common, though, that they are established from the ground up, involving a whole range of academics, and that they are still rooted in specific communities of scholars and students, while also engaging with broader international trends. And that, I would say, is much closer to a truly cosmopolitan outlook, and a much better way of engendering it in both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

N&N response: You ask how much time to people like Agamben spend in the Alps. I can tell you for sure, it is a couple of weeks a year. However, I can also say confidently that the faculty there, whether Agamben, Badiou or Žižek, is fully dedicated to their Ph.D. students, providing as much individual tutorship and guidance as professors anywhere else, if not more. *To your point about junior colleagues being 'minions', well, perhaps this could be the case if there are only two universities like EGS or GCAS, but if they became the norm, would this be the case?* Also, these universities are dedicated to very specific topics, which bring in not just big names, but promising young leaders in the field, including recent Ph.D.s, based almost completely on intellectual promise, as opposed to a CV with elite institutions listed on it, or the holding of the proper passport or bank account. That brings me to your note on transcending boundaries. I should point out that most, if not all, of the European degree schemes do not transcend citizenship issues: all students must hold EU passports. *I wonder if the national-state model of European universities could ever allow them to run truly 'international' schemes that took no consideration of one's citizenship status?*

The program that you are running at Aberystwyth sounds fantastic, and it would be great if you could explain it a bit further. It still faces the problems, though, I imagine, of traditional tuitions, national citizenships, and of course the growing issues of OA in the UK, which will, as you suggest, potentially lead to academic decisions being taken out of the hands of academics in these institutions. *Would independent institutions not be better placed to avoid these problems?*

Prof. Weiler response: The issue of citizenship status is indeed irritating, though I think the problem may rest less with universities than the political context within which they operate. How far EU institutions can transcend that is difficult to say, but I imagine governments other than the British one would probably be quite happy to promote a kind of truly international outreach. As far as the Aberystwyth programme is concerned: that is still in the planning stages, and we need to see whether we can get university managements to support the initiative.

Concerning international institutions: whatever you do, you still face the problem that somehow these institutions need to fund themselves – Agamben and Badiou still draw a salary from another institution for the vast remainder of the year. Even a private not-for-profit university, run like a cooperative by academic staff, while able to save a lot of money on managerial salaries, would still need to break even, and would still need to generate revenue to pay for salaries, buildings, library holdings, studentships and the necessary administration. Much of that income, in turn, would need to come from tuition fees (unless a private donor would be willing to donate $3-4 billion as the endowment for a liberal arts college that is free for everyone it admits). That ultimately remains my key concern about institutions like GCAS and EGS as much as Grayling's outfit in London (a private, commercial liberal arts college): to some extent they depend on already established institutions to provide much of the infrastructure they need, and the pool of academic talents on which they draw. Maybe more could be done through informal working groups transcending individual institutions, collaborative PhD programmes, etc., but we will always run into barriers rooted in the world outside academe. Sometimes we can circumvent or surmount them, sometimes we may simply have to put up with them and make the best of a less than perfect situation.

12. N&N: To finish with some somewhat 'lighter' questions: *what would you say is your approach to teaching and your pedagogy? What do you think medieval history adds to Humanities and cross-disciplinary studies, and to higher education as a whole? Why should the Middle Ages be taught?*

The key principle is perhaps that teaching is first and foremost about the students – the goal is to teach them how to think, to give them a sense of (and, ideally, a taste for) the past. There is no point in showing off how bright one is, as most students would lack the knowledge to judge whether or not that self-perception holds true; of course students know very little (if they were fonts of knowledge, they would not need introductory classes); and of course they make silly mistakes – but then so did I as an undergraduate (and still do), and getting students to grasp why something is conceivably wrong or at least open to debate is the first step in teaching them how to think. Of course, research led teaching is (or should be) the key difference between universities and schools. Trying out ideas on students, or simply having to explain concepts to a group of nineteen year olds can instill intellectual rigour, but it also forces one to think more broadly. But all that is an added benefit and will work only if we keep in mind that first principle. This does not mean that we should lower our expectations, but it does mean that we tailor the steps we expect students to take to their abilities and to the conditions under which they study, and that we make sure that the enthusiasm and curiosity that led them to the subject in the first place (nobody studies History in order to become rich) can be fanned, and used to steer them onto those more unfamiliar terrains they may not have thought about, but where the real fun and enjoyment in doing History can be had.

As to what Medieval History adds: chronological depth and the need to think more carefully about what one does with the sources. It is worth reminding students that we have about 3,000 years worth of recorded history (a lot more if we use biology and genetics and archeology). So, modernity is really just a flash in the pan. On a conceptual level, the evidence is so limited that medievalists – especially those working on periods before c. 1250 – have to use a very broad range of sources and methods. We (should) use every scrap of evidence on which we can lay our hands. That does, of course, require some familiarity with different types of sources and different types of evidence, and perhaps more so than in some modern contexts. Second, we have to fill many more gaps with guesswork and by using our imagination. Ideally, this should bring with it a greater degree of self-reflection and methodological literacy. Finally, the Middle Ages are both seemingly familiar and

fundamentally different from our own experience, and this again provides quite a useful means for teaching students about historical change and what it means, and to instil in them a degree of respect for the past, the need to be mindful of what is different about it and why, and maybe a degree of humility about their own views and preconceptions (which may well look silly to future generations). In my experience, the best modern historians are those who did quite a bit of medieval history (though, to be fair, the reverse goes for medievalists). In that sense, studying the Middle Ages just makes for far better historians, literary scholars, linguists, art historians etc. After all, among the key issues in which humanities scholars are interested is change – change over time, factors driving change, the conditions under and the manner in which it unfolds. To grasp that change, we need a perspective that extends beyond the twentieth century. And once we can get social scientists to realise that just because something happened more than three months ago it is not ancient history, we may not only be able to learn something about questions that a relative abundance of sources makes it possible to pose (and which we may not have thought of), but we will also be able to save them from perpetually reinventing the wheel. Everyone will gain.

N&N response: By the way you explain it, the importance of studying the Middle Ages seems transparent, if not only as a (very politically and philosophically significant) way of imagining a world that does not exist. Why do you think study of the Middle Ages is under threat, then, relative to other subjects?

Prof. Weiler response: I do not think the threat exists in terms of actual student demand or general public interest. At Aberystwyth we certainly cannot complain about a lack of student interest – if anything, we could do with a few more lecturers to meet that demand. Rather, the problem is very similar to the one discussed with regard to public views of history. Remember the education secretary (who, in an act of *damnatio memoriae*, shall remain unnamed) who allegedly said there was nothing wrong with universities keeping on a few medievalists for 'ornamental purposes', but institutions should focus on doing economically relevant research? Some universities are quite capable of ignoring this kind of thinking: Lincoln, for instance, is expanding its medievalist contingent, as has Durham, and Warwick just advertised

their first ever (though temporary) post in medieval history. To some extent, of course, we medievalists need to do more to engage with our modernist colleagues and with those in other disciplines. We also need to be a bit more self-confident: yes, we are dealing with quite a remote and distant past, but dealing with that past does not only make excellent academic sense, it also has the potential to gain a much better understanding of problems that face contemporary society. Again, the experience at Aberystwyth in this respect is a very good one – we even talk to social scientists. Having said that, there can be an inherent modernist hostility towards the pre-modern. I know of some English departments, for instance, where the literary theorists in particular pursued an active policy of weeding out anything pre-modern as old-fashioned and irrelevant. These departments have now become glorified creative writing workshops with no students. In general, though, if there is a crisis, it is one that has been generated outside the lecture room, and irrespective of any general interest in what we do. That is a problem, and it is unfair, and it means we have to deal with ill-informed prejudices that, like all prejudices, are rooted in ignorance and lazy thinking, but it also means that we have the tools at our disposal to do something about the situation.

N&N, Final Thoughts: Thank you for your time, detailed thoughts and willingness to tackle some lengthy and sensitive questions. I am sure we could continue going back and forth, and I have many secondary follow-up questions, but time and space prevent it for now. I hope you enjoyed this foray with a very early medievalist, and look forward to further engagement with *Networks and Neighbours.*

Prof. Weiler, Final Thoughts: This was good fun, though I do apologise for droning on!