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SPEAKERS

Dr. Ryan Szpiech, Ben Pykare, Will Beattie



Will Beattie 00:05

I'm Will Beattie.



Ben Pykare 00:07

And I'm Ben Pykare.



Will Beattie 00:08

And we're two graduate students at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.



Ben Pykare 00:12

We're here to chat with students and scholars of the medieval world about what they do and how they came to do it.



Will Beattie 00:18

So, who have we got today then?



Ben Pykare 00:19

Well, today we're sitting down with Dr. Ryan Szpiech, Associate Professor of Spanish and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan. We're talking to him today about medieval Spain, language studies, and his recent

lecture here at the Medieval Institute: "In the Name of the Father: Translation and Anxiety in Medieval Castile from 1250 to 1369."



Will Beattie 00:43

Well, then let's go and meet him in the Middle Ages.



Ben Pykare 00:46

Dr. Szpiech, thank you for sitting down with us this morning.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 00:50

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.



Will Beattie 00:53

We'd like to start a conversation with a question. You're in a supermarket and it's busy, maybe you made the mistake of going to the Martins near the Notre Dame Campus on a football game day. The line is long, and you start chatting to the guy next to you. And he asks, "what do you do?" How do you answer that question?



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 01:11

I would say, as I often say to my own parents, when they asked me, "what do you do anyway?" I am a teacher who's interested in the influence of non Christian cultures on medieval Spain. And I work on history, and I work on literary texts. And I'm really interested in religion. I teach both undergraduates and graduate students, and I have an interest in public scholarship. And so I tried to talk to the public as well about these interests.



Will Beattie 01:44

That's a clear, succinct definition, one that really foregrounds the place of teaching in the academic world.



Ben Pykare 01:49

I really enjoyed your lecture last night, I "virtually" was able to attend, which was nice, because I can pause you and Google things to make sure I was fully tracking. In your introduction, Professor Berman praised you, rightly, for how interdisciplinary your work is, and how you straddle history, literary studies, Spanish language studies... So with all of these different kinds of hats you're wearing, how do you, kind of, see yourself as a scholar?

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 02:23

Well, that's a really personal question, relevant, personally relevant question for me, because I have always thought of myself as intentionally trying to construct a kind of multidisciplinary identity. That is, I didn't want to fall into one single way of doing things. And the reason for that is that I always had the idea, even in graduate school, and definitely, as I started off on my career, that there's no one definitive way that I think is representative of Medieval Studies. And in fact, Medieval Studies represents a kind of collection of disparate methodologies and viewpoints, not only because they're looking at different languages, or different areas of culture, or history, but because they actually work on some of the same things in completely different ways. And so I thought I really wouldn't be a proper medievalist or proper scholar if I didn't try to be methodologically, diverse and flexible, which meant to me trying out things that really almost worked against one another. Sometimes looking at language in a in a very physiological way, and sometimes throwing that out the window and trying to think in a much more literary interpretive way. Sometimes thinking about what a text editor needs when they look at a text or a manuscript or a variant. Sometimes thinking about, you know, what a metaphor means, even if it's completely inappropriate, or it's theoretically really modern. And that's something that actually holds a lot of water from a historical point of view. But I still think that all of these methodologies are at play in Medieval Studies, and if I wanted to be a medievalist to, you know, and I thought, you know, someone who really wasn't just in a corner of my discipline, but really speaking to medievalists, then I would try to be methodologically diverse. So that's how I've worked in my careers. Trying out different methodologies.



Will Beattie 04:28

And how do you do that? How do you manage to practice and develop so many different methodologies over your career?

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 04:35

Well, I have often tried to build off of one subject, and think of the different ways that you might actually work on that subject when I'm starting off on a project. I think, partly, I start with a list of possible approaches, not necessarily ones that I'm capable of achieving or realizing. But how could different medievalists work on this topic? And then [I] think well, which ones could I actually attempt?

B

Ben Pykare 05:07

Yeah.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 05:08

So for example, starting off work on the 13th century Dominican, Ramon MartÃ, something that Professor Berman has also worked quite a lot on. And we've worked together on it, we've even given a joint lecture on it once. There are some really interesting topics that have to do with

the manuscripts.



Will Beattie 05:26

Yeah



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 05:27

Right? The manuscripts themselves, especially of his last and largest work, "The Dagger of Faith," [in Latin] "Pugio Fidei," have not been properly collated or edited. There's no critical edition. There's not even a functional edition. There's a 17th century printing that's based on faulty sources and manuscripts. And so there are manuscripts that have a lot of material that's not in the so called "printed copy." That in itself is really interesting, but it requires a very philological approach. At the same time, the content of these texts—both what's in the manuscript alone, as well as what you find in you know, in the printed edition as well—there's a lot of questions that to me [...] go far beyond the question of what text is the established text. That is, he's using a lot of alphabets: not only writing his text in Latin, but obsessively citing his texts, from Hebrew Bible from Rabbinical tradition, as well as—I've discovered—from Quran, and some other Arabic sources. And he writes them out in the original languages, for the most part, in one column to the right, and then translates them or writes in Latin on the left. So there are all sorts of interesting questions that one can ask based on just that information.



Ben Pykare 06:50

Yes.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 06:50

Why does he site this way? Why does he so obsessive? Does he make mistakes?



Will Beattie 06:55

Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 06:55

And then strange things he does, such as deciding to cite the Quran in Arabic, but using Hebrew letters to write it. Why would he do such a thing? So I started following this path really in a more interpretive vein and asking, "What does it imply to use an alphabet?" Really not a not at all, a kind of philological, technical question. More an interpretive question. What does it imply to use a certain alphabet? What does it imply in terms of his authority?



Will Beattie 07:05



Will Beattie 07:25

Yeah.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 07:25

What does it say about his goals and really his intentions? And also, what can it tell us about his circumstances? Perhaps it shows us that he's really writing for people who couldn't read Arabic script. Maybe it means he couldn't use or write Arabic script. Or maybe he thinks that Hebrew letters have a certain prestige, or a certain symbolic value. All of these questions, I think, take us in different directions.

B

Ben Pykare 07:49

All good questions. Yeah.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 07:51

Part of writing on it meant first trying some of the more physiological attempts, right, actually picking a chunk and deciding if I was going to try to edit it. So I did that with the actual Quranic citations in Hebrew letters. I actually did a little edition, a very mini edition, since the longest passages are about six or seven pages. So I looked at all the manuscripts, I made an edition and a translation. And I [...] documented every single variant and tried to establish how these texts traveled, and really what versions he was using and what variants, or kind of, errors or mistakes were irrelevant. So it was a philological exercise. But who's interested in that kind of work? Only a certain audience.

B

Ben Pykare 08:34

That's right. Sadly true. And for our audience, when we talk about making an edition" of something, right. Dr.Szpiech just laid out, you know, really well what that is right of: looking at the available manuscripts, right? All the incidents of the text we have. Comparing contrasting using what we call "text critical methods" to try to get back to a recreation of what we think is closest to the original as possible. Is that more or less? And then you went the step of including, in, I'm sure very rigorous footnotes, every alternative reading, which is great for future scholars trying to continue that work of deciding what was said, what was written down.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 09:23

But at the same time, it's a certain kind of thinking about the text and what we want to get out of it. And I knew that it would be more useful to scholars who are comfortable with and frequently, you know, appreciate this philological work. So I published this in Spain, in Spanish. At the same time as I wrote that article edition, I also wrote a more interpretive piece about the implications of using an alphabet, a certain alphabet rather than another. Or the implications of

sounding out the Quran in a non Arabic or even in a Hebrew alphabet. So what does that actually signify in a cultural context? Is he doing it deliberately? Or is it just a default, because that's what he knows?



Will Beattie 10:08

Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 10:09

And that was a much more interpretive question or set of questions. And I thought the audience for that would be definitely in the [United] States. And I published that in English, in an essay that really was completely different, although it was on the same material. So I tried to bring in even theoretical questions about that, that I thought would really only be interesting to a certain segment of medievalists who are thinking about ways of bringing in theoretical questions of power, and language. So all of these things, I think, are relevant, but they're completely different. And sometimes, when you work on a text like that, from different perspectives, it feels like you're split between contrary, contradictory methods. And so I've always tried to find ways of splitting myself, I think it's productive, because it's a challenge to me. And it's also a way of getting at what I think are the best methodologies or the most productive ways of looking at a text. I think also another methodology that I branched out into that, you know, I wasn't trained this way in... from the beginning, but it's increasingly interesting to me is the question of historiography in relation to narrative sources. So how historiography treats, say the problem of language and how it's grown or changed since the so-called "narrative turn." And I think that this definitely, many historians, cultural historians, social historians even are dealing with this. But I think there's a lot of work to do in especially medieval sources that maybe are on the cusp of two different shapes or forms; that is a narrative that really reveals a lot of social, sort of social information. But at the same time [it] is completely constructed in a narrative way that requires an actual literary reading, not simply mining for data, but actually a careful critical analysis of metaphor, voice perspective, or what have you. And so I think, I'm really interested in how history writing and historians deal with literary sources. And I've found particularly fruitful narratives of conversion. And this is something I've written a book about because it's a problematic set of texts from a historiographical perspective. How do you treat something like conversion in a historiographical context? Is it an event? Does it... is it something that can be traced with data? And if so, where do you get that data? And then on what grounds do you decide that that information is what constitutes say, a conversion?



Will Beattie 12:59


Right.





Dr. Ryan Szpiech 13:00

Is it a baptism? Is it a narrative written after the fact affirming an experience? Or do we simply take the experience as narrated, usually by a convert, as actually an event? When someone has an illumination or a turn. Is that something that happens in the world that we can put in


has an inflection, or a turn, is that something that happens in the world that we can put in historical record? Sometimes we talk about conversion as if it has a date, sometimes even a specific day or time of day!


 Ben Pykare 13:30
Yeah.


 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 13:31
that's a conceptual decision that I think imposes a shape on this metaphor that we're talking about. And I find that to be fascinating because it's a methodological problem. That is, you can think about conversion in terms of religious experience. But when you try to talk about social change, or social history, you have to fix it in a certain moment. You're talking about who changes from what to where, what communities, and it falls into a chronology, and into a space.

 Will Beattie 14:02
Yeah.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 14:03
So you're reducing something that's quite broad and diverse into a single set of data points.

 Ben Pykare 14:09
Yeah.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 14:10
That then can be compared to other data points. But I find it to be, in a way, reductive, but also necessary.

 Will Beattie 14:16
Yeah. And this, I suppose, also gets at the challenge, which historians always face, which is trying not to allow modern conceptions of what conversion may mean in any... and that can vary across cultures even now, of course, and across religious systems. But making sure that you're not applying too much of our own time our own understanding to the text and maybe forcing a reading upon the text which may not actually be there in the first place.

B

Ben Pykare 14:46

Yeah. While at the same time, when sometimes these modern connections are what draw audiences, right? Like I loved your lecture last night, which is on the Medieval Institute YouTube page, and we'll have a look into that. But your discussion about memory and anxiety and the desire to be remembered and to create something lasting, right, which led to—and your lecture was on Alfonso the 10th, right—to create a very multilingual monument, right, to his father's memory, perhaps with the anxiety, like, "lest he be forgotten, I'm going to preserve this man in four different languages and put them side by side." Even though, you know, for a Castilian king, you know, to be using Arabic and Hebrew, and as you mentioned, like, Castilian in inscription. Like, all of these were choices, right, that, you know, maybe historically, we can read into, right? As he was genuinely concerned about these things. But also on a, you know, human level, of a desire to be remembered, and our parents to be remembered. That's a very relatable hook, you could say, for jumping into, you know, medieval Spanish history, which I kind of want to jump back a little bit and ask you: "what got you interested in Spanish as a language and medieval Spain as a time period, at that place?" I just am curious how people end up there.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:25

So I could tell this journey in a couple of ways. But maybe I should start with why did I ever start studying Spanish? When I was 13, 12 maybe, we had to choose a language. And, of course, at that time, and maybe still, there was an idea—completely wrong—that Spanish was easier than French. And so I thought, well, I'll do whatever is easiest, because I didn't want to do any of it. I didn't want a language. I didn't have any interest in any other cultures. And so I just picked what was easiest, because my interests were elsewhere; I was an adolescent boy. And that's how I started Spanish. Without really loving it, you know? I started Spanish, like many millions of children do, with the plan that I would do what needed to be done and leave it. I had interests in medicine. And when I went off to college, I majored in pre med, in physiology, with a pre med track. And I was very, very committed to that all through high school, really obsessed with planning for med school, and studying and thinking about, you know, my future career in medicine. Particularly in neurology. I had very specific ideas on what I thought I wanted to do. And I got to my junior year in high school, when I was preparing to go to college. And [I] had already gotten into college. I was planning to graduate early after three years, and had already applied and gotten in to the university. And [I] had even gotten a scholarship for that. Right. So I was really...

B

Ben Pykare 18:04

You were a driven young man!

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 18:05

I was driven, and I was, you know, very, very clear on my goals. And I thought, "I'm gonna get it." And you know, and I also felt successful that I knew how to get it. Somehow, it was clear to me to pursue that goal. And as I, as I was... this is junior year, our class was preparing for their SATs. And I had already done all of this on my own outside of the system because I wanted to apply early, you know, in the first half of my junior year with this plan in mind. And so the

teacher said, "well, what are you going to do while we're preparing for the SATs and class? You need to do a project or something." This was English class. So she said, "go to the library, and find a book and read it and report on it, you know, to the class, you have two weeks while we're doing this." And so I did, I went and I actually chose two books. And these two books completely overturned my entire plan in life and set me on a course towards language. And one of them was "The Interpretation of Dreams," by Freud, and the other was "Leaves of Grass," by Walt Whitman. I read both of these, and they completely just exploded my entire sense of what I was doing what I wanted, why I wanted it.



Will Beattie 19:23

Why did you pick those two books? Were they, kind of, a random, you just looked at a shelf and thrust your hand out, and those are the two that came back?



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 19:31

It's hard to say. I had heard of both of them. And I'm not sure where. But you know, picking up on things. I had an older sister who was sort of a young, burgeoning intellectual, and maybe she talked to me about these things. My parents were not at all intellectuals. My father never went to college. He's a barber. And my mother was a teacher who had only gone to college later. So at that point, I might even sure she was done with college herself. So I had really not had a lot of exposure to any of these things. And I wasn't a reader as a child either. And so I'm not sure where I picked up on this, but I'm gonna, I'm gonna guess it must have been from my sister, who was five years older.



Will Beattie 20:18

Was she also part of the way that you were able to get this plan? Because I'm just thinking back to myself at that sort of age, and I had no idea what I was doing, or how I would achieve anything. I didn't understand how the system work. I didn't know what you needed to do. So the idea of doing this work outside of class to say, "Okay, if I want to get to this point, I need to do these things." How did you... how did you work that out?



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 20:43

I think it was just a challenge to myself. I was really a delinquent in junior high, you know, I got in trouble frequently, even with the law. Suspensions from school, run-ins with the law. I broke windows at the local elementary school and had to pay them back all kinds of, you know, I was really a delinquent. And I'm not sure why, but I think I was bored. But at a certain point, I remember my sister saying, "it's because, you know [...], you're not smart enough to do other things. So that's why you do this." And I, and I was offended. My dignity was offended. And I said, "no, it's because that's just what I want to do. Because everything, you know, what you're doing is stupid." And so she sort of challenged me, right? She's five years older, and she had enough maturity to know how to play my psychology. And she said, "well, okay, if you think you can do it, then show me. And then you don't have to do it, you know, if you don't really want to. But prove you can, or otherwise I won't believe you."



Will Beattie 21:45

Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 21:46

So I took it as a challenge. And that's how I started off actually becoming more driven in school, just to really prove her wrong. To say, "it's not that I want to... It's not that I can't do that."



Ben Pykare 21:59

Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 22:00

"It's that I'm choosing to do what I think is fun, not, you know, because I'm stupid." So I set off to get good grades. And I did. And I was actually quite good at chemistry and science. And [I] enjoyed it a lot, actually, and found, wow, this is really, actually fulfilling. And I was really more driven in the sciences than anything else. But I also... I liked my other classes, including English. And [I] started picking up reading and started actually, you know, taking interest in my own private reading. But all of it was still with this idea of challenging, you know, challenging my sister's challenge or proving her wrong.



Will Beattie 22:38

Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 22:39

And then it got to be an obsession, you know, I'm not sure where but I saw maybe films about doctors, especially surgeons, and this became my own obsession. I mean, I was an arrogant young little guy. I thought I can do whatever I want, and I will do it the way I want. So I saw these ideals and thought "I'll do it." And that one seemed like a very powerful and successful career track. So... and as I went along, I was also really interested in the mind, and the problem of, sort of, the material mind and human experience. Not because I had a clear idea philosophically, but I was definitely drawn to the problem of, you know, the material brain and how it relates to human activity.



Will Beattie 23:24

Right.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 23:24

You know, I'm a kid still, but I'm thinking like... I'm thinking I had it all figured out. And so maybe along that track, too, I started hearing about things like Freud...

B

Ben Pykare 23:34

Yeah

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 23:35

...and other ways of thinking about human experience in the mind. And then when I picked up these books, I discovered a way of thinking that I hadn't thought of yet, I hadn't encountered. And that, to me, again, was a challenge. All of a sudden, it was like: I thought I had it figured out, I thought I had my plan mapped out. And then I saw these books and really dug into these books. And it was like a new way of seeing human thought and human experience. Really two different, completely different ways. But really, it was the the idea of "metaphor" that just blew me up completely. And I realized, you can't only think or I couldn't only think about the material mind, that there were all these other aspects of meaning that couldn't be accounted for, including beauty, and subjectivity. But not only that. So there were also fear and horror and anxiety, as I was talking about yesterday. And so I got really interested in dreams in particular. I started keeping a dream journal. I started reading up on dreams. And that's where I thought I was going. I thought I would pivot from my medical career and I would become a sleep specialist and study dreams. So each thing was like, "Okay, I'll do that. I'll do that." But by the time I got to the university I was more obsessed with the literature than I was with the medicine. So here I was on a scholarship, you know, and I was young too. I had left high school early, I was only 16. And I was really more interested in my literature classes than in my actual... and my writing classes than in my, you know, physiology, or chemistry, which was a weird thing for me because I had always been interested in those. And so I switched my major completely after my first year, even though I had a scholarship for that year, because... from the hospital. I had gotten completely funded for my studies. I was like on this particular track. But I gave it up and went to poetry writing, is what my new major was. I switched to creative writing with a specialty in poetry. And secondâ€”you had to pick two out of three modes: poetry, prose, or exposition. So I did poetry and exposition. And so that's kind of chapter one, how I got...

B

Ben Pykare 25:58

Yeah

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 25:59

...onto language in general. I still didn't like Spanish. And I still didn't want to study foreign languages. It hadn't clicked for me yet.

B Ben Pykare 26:06

It's so funny, because I mean, you work in so many languages. I assumed that you were like, "so I came in, I was like, I need to learn Arabic in undergrad, I need to, I need to do some Hebrew, not just Biblical stuff." Okay, so this was later. I'm seeing the picture now.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 26:24

Well, during that year, you know, I had kind of gone off the rails as far as academic seriousness. Not that I was doing poorly, but I was really just on a vision quest artistically. More and more interested in my own creativity.



Will Beattie 26:37

Right.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 26:38

Right. I became a Romantic, I guess, right? I started seeking transcendence through my own inner depths. And on that quest, I wanted adventure. You know, I wanted life to show me interesting things. And I saw an announcement to study abroad. This was still my freshman year, and I'm a young freshman. Just fresh out of my old thing. And I saw this announcement to go to Spain for a year. And somehow [I] convinced my family. My parents were really... I think about it now, I would never let my own kids do these things, just especially at a young age. But they were very permissive and encouraging. And so by the time I was... still, I was now 17. Not even 18. And I went off to Barcelona for a year. And I convinced my best friend to go with me too. And we were, you know, on the same kind of track, we just wanted adventure and fun. He wanted to write as well. So we were looking for exciting things in Europe. And that year is really what changed me. Because I was suddenly able to connect my interest in human meaning and the ways that humans construct experience and identity over time, but also in their inner self, with language. And I realized that languages were one of these really cool puzzles that are actually, sort of, uncontainable. That you have all of the infinity of possibilities that makes human experience interesting, that I was really interested in through art or through poetry. You have it in language, and in particular, you know, the problem of "signification." And so I got, I started geeking out completely on language. And I got super interested in Spanish at that point. But not just Spanish, it was like Spanish suddenly became one among many really quickly, and I realized there's a world of languages out there, you know. I could have gotten into linguistics, but it was just a little bit too sober for me, you know. I was interested in... still kind of a free free spirit. Yeah. I wanted to talk to people. I wanted to learn their languages. I wanted to learn their jargon, you know, their, their ways of talking to each other when other foreigners weren't around and they were speaking in their own inner private language. And the idea of a private language fascinated me so much. Still does fascinate me. Language is shared or code-shared by people intimately in communities, or even just in pairs. I think that's amazing. And in Spain, I also had the chance "because I was in Barcelona" to pick up Catalan. Or start, I should say. "Pick up" is, is really minimizing the effort. I learned how hard languages are and how hard it is to actually do well with them, and that these are lifelong pursuits. So I started studying

Catalan, I started getting better at Spanishâ€”actually caringâ€”and made a list of things that needed to be done, right. Like, if I'm going to be studying these things, I want to know French. I want to know Latin because I want to know where these things come from.



Will Beattie 26:51

Yeah. I'm seeing a pattern here. The way you approach these kinds of challenges. Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 29:54

everything. It's definitely something catches my fancy and my eye and then I think, "I've kind of do this." And I make lists of, you know, the new projects on my horizon.



Ben Pykare 30:02

That's exciting.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 30:03

It's always about challenging myself, you know, like, I'm, I guess I'm never satisfied with what I can already do and just want to plod along. Then I want to turn to something new, which maybe is why I'm interested in methodological challenges. I want to try to do work in a way that I don't know how to do.



Will Beattie 30:20

Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 30:20

And see if I can do it. And when... as far as language goes, by the time I got back from Spain, I had a clear idea that this is something I wanted to be doing. But I still didn't know how, or what, and hadn't fully registered that the Middle Ages were the coolest place to do this. So that was still to happen. But the seed had been planted.



Will Beattie 30:43

Can you say that again? Sorry, "that the Middle Ages are the coolest place?"



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 30:46

Absolutely. The Middle Ages are, without question, the coolest place. It's all there in many

different, you know, in many different manifestations and iterations. So all you young people out there, you can choose this path of righteousness and glory, or you can follow the path, you know, take the blue pill or the red pill. This is your choice now.

B

Ben Pykare 31:09

The medieval pill. That's great. So, yeah, so how did you kind of then, maybe, pull that thread back in time to Medieval Studies? Was that still in undergrad? Or was that in further studies?

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 31:25

Well, is like I said, the seed had been planted in Spain. When I had a history of art professor that year who was a medievalist. He was a really decorated and interesting guy, Basilio Losada, who was a professor at Barcelona, University of Barcelona, but also was an active translator from Galician, from Galego, and did a lot for the Galician language modern literature as well as medieval all the way, you know, through really all periods of Galician literature. And he was even elected, I think, to the Academy of Letters of Galicia. I mean, he became really quite known as an important representative and an important voice. But he also taught these classes, sort of, on the side for interested young people, maybe just for foreigners, I'm not sure. But I was in his class on art history. And it was a two semester course, that sort of chronicled all of art history from the beginning of humanization and, you know, beadmaking, all the way through the 20th century.

B

Ben Pykare 31:28

Yeah. Wow.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 32:35

So semester, one was, included the Middle Ages. And he was really interested in the Camino de Santiago because he was interested in Galicia. So he talked to us about these different traditions or habits of the pilgrims in the Middle Ages. And I thought that was really cool. One of them I remember was that he, he said, they would often greet each other on the path. And I'm not sure if this is actually even, you know, historically verifiable, but it sounded so cool at the time, you know... two monks would greet each other on the Camino. And they would say, "Brother, we have to die." And then the answer would be, "die, we shall." And I was like, "who are these people? This is so cool. I want to know more about guys." And he also talked to us about places, Romanesque structures that were built along the Camino, that had now been abandoned. Because there were many spurs, apparently, that I didn't know about at the time, of the Camino. Many different ways you could, you know, there wasn't just the main road, but there were lots of little side roads and other pieces.



Will Beattie 33:41

I wanted to ask actually, just to clarify where the Camino is, you know, the start and end points

of that pilgrim path.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 33:49

So it runs along the north of Spain through the Pyrenees, but also from Barcelona. So there are multiple beginning parts,. And it runs... they converge, and it runs then along the north of the peninsula, towards Santiago de Compostela, which is in the far northwest of the peninsula, north of Portugal, in Galicia. And the reason for that, why Santiago, has to do with a legend of having allegedly discovered St. James, relics of St. James there. And so a cult grew up in the Middle Ages around that space, around that place. That eventually became a pilgrimage site, one of a number of important pilgrimage sites in Europe. And that one in particular drew people from all over Spain, all over northern Spain, but also from Europe. So people... there was a path that led down even from Paris and another from Germany. It was quite an active pilgrimage route. In part, Santiago became a kind of correlative opposition to Muhammad in the Christian Iberian mind. So the figure of "Santiago the Moor Slayer" became popular, "Santiago Matamoros," as a kind of hero of the Conquest, the Reconquest of Iberia by the Christians. In fact, as I tell my students, right, have you ever been to "Kill the Moors" and they will look at me and think, "what is he saying?" And I said, "you know, south of Brownsville, Texas, you can go to Matamoros in Mexico. Why do you think it's called Matamoros? It's just over the border. We can you know, we could drive there today."

B

Ben Pykare 35:41

What a problematic city name.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 35:43

A little problematic. Yeah, so...

B

Ben Pykare 35:47

Oh, wow. So crazy.

D

Dr. Ryan Szpiech 35:50

There are a number of towns like this in Spain that have really interesting, sort of, backgrounds, not just Spain, but Mexico has Matamoros. But there was a town in Lyon, I think called "Castrillo MatajudÃaos," right, "Kill the Jews Castle." Which is problematic for sure. And so problematic that the town decided to change their name to "Mota de JudÃaos," "The Hill of the Jews."



Will Beattie 36:19

Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 36:19

Right? Kind of erasing or forgetting the history of the fact that Jews actually had been really massacred there. But these towns, you know, are really interesting, sort of, symbols or representatives of this past when it was okay to use this language or think this way. And even today, you can go to say, Leon, during Holy Week and participate in a festival of lemonade and wine. It's a really local tradition, you have a wine mixed with lemonade, and what do they call this? You know, we call it sometimes "knocking back soldiers" or "having a cold one." In Lyon in this in Holy Week, this tradition is still called "Matar JudÃaos," right? You "go kill Jews," meaning you pound these lemonades. Right?



Will Beattie 37:14

Wow, right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 37:15

It's, an awful, awful metaphor, but it persists. And people don't really make the connection. They don't necessarily think of it.



Ben Pykare 37:23

It's just jargon.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 37:24

It's just jargon...



Ben Pykare 37:24

It's just colloquial phrasing. Yeah.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 37:27

... leftover phrasing, just like any other... I mean, many other racist phrases persist or have persisted until quite recently in English that people would use without thinking about it. You know, things that people would say without thinking about black people, but they would say something is lily white, or they would say whatever, right? These these kinds of, I don't know, traces in language definitely persist in Spain, in other kinds of ways. And in names of places and names of traditions, definitely. So I kind of started picking up on these little facts and got more and more interested. I didn't know anything about history. But I was fascinated and took it as a challenge, as apparently I do when I don't know something. I'm motivated to want to

know it. And when he told me about this village, my professor said, "you know, it's completely abandoned. But it's a Romanesque village, and there's actually a chapel there that, last I saw, was abandoned." I thought, "I'm going, that's where I want to go." And he I asked him how to get there. He said, "it's really impossible. You know, there's no clear road and you need a car and probably you need a car and a backpack." And I said, "great." And I started hitchhiking and hitchhiked as far as I could go. And then I met a local shepherd who said, "you'll never find that I'll show you you know, it'll take a while." So I stayed with him for a few days. And then he took me to this village, and I stayed in this village, which... it was there! It was right near Fago, which is in the mountains near Navarra. But it itself didn't have a name apparently. And I stayed there by myself for a week. And it was kind of this vision quest... ... in the Middle Ages, right. I was living in a Romanesque read the ruins of a Romanesque structure. Doing nothing really . Just, like, trying to find water and you know, having canned peas. But I was definitely on a vision quest to, like, find myself and go places I had never been. And I think that was the seed that really made me want to be a medievalist.



Will Beattie 39:42

I'm going to call it now. And now, that might be one of the best origin stories we'll ever hear.



Ben Pykare 39:48

Yeah, for anyone else wanting to do Medieval Studies. First, you gotta go on a vision quest, bring peas. You will need to sustain yourself.



Will Beattie 39:58

Befriend a shepherd.



Ben Pykare 40:00

Yes, yes, that is thanks for sharing that story.



Will Beattie 40:03

Well, Ben, this was a really interesting conversation that covered a lot of ground. So much so that we've split the episode into two. And we'll be dropping the second half next week. What can we look forward to then?



Ben Pykare 40:14

We'll be covering the making of Dr. Speeches documentary on the Spanish language, his lecture at the Medieval Institute on the polymath Alfonso the 10th of Castile, as well as the professor's future writing plans.



Will Beattie 40:26

I hope you'll all join us then in the Middle Ages. "Meeting In the Middle Ages" is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for a medievalist, send them to us at "meetinginthema@gmail.com." You can follow us on Twitter at "MeetingintheMA" and Instagram at "MeetingintheMiddleAges". For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening.