Meeting in the Middle Ages
Interview with Dr. Thomas Smith, 11/01/25

Will: [00:04]
I'm Will Beattie.

Ben: [00:07]
I'm Ben Pykare.

Will: [00:08]
And we are two members of the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame.

Ben: [00:13]
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: [00:18]
So, who have we got today, Ben?

Ben: [00:21]
Today we're sitting down with Dr. Thomas W. Smith, Keeper of the Scholars and Head of Oxbridge Arts and Humanities at the Rugby School. We'll be chatting with him about his new book, *Rewriting The First Crusade: Epistolary Culture in the Middle Ages*.

Will: [00:38]
Let's go and meet him in the Middle Ages.

Hi, Dr. Smith. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Smith: [00:44]
Hi, guys. It's so nice to be on the podcast. Thank you for having me.

Will: [00:48]
Now, we normally begin with setting up some kind of increasingly elaborate context in which you are asked to give an account of what you do for a living. But given that you are Keeper of the Scholars, I feel like we can just begin there, and I think a lot of people listening would just love ... they would love to know "What exactly is Keeper of the Scholars? Who are the scholars that you're keeping?"

Smith: [01:13]
That's right, yeah. Who are these scholars that I'm keeping? So, it's a very grandiose title, I'm afraid. I look after the academic scholars at Rugby School with a great colleague of mine, Andy Davies. And we organize enrichment activities and events and trips and lectures for them. And we're actually doing something tonight with the scholars later on this evening. I'll get a group of the pupils in, and we're going to look at a medieval artifact, and we're gonna think about how we might research that and what sort of stories, objects we can tell—and materiality.

We've got a trip coming up next week to Coventry. We're going to look at some of the, sort of, medieval splendor of the city and have a tour of the city. So it's those kinds of things. It's trying to stretch the pupil, really, and give them academic enrichment. And obviously, I skew it towards the Middle Ages, of course.

Will: [01:58]
Absolutely. We're all for that here. That sounds incredible, then. So, the scholars are the students themselves. You're trying to engage them intellectually and build them up as researchers.

Smith: [02:07]
Yeah, precisely. So, we're trying to develop the sort of independent, original thinking, the critical thinking skills that you need to succeed as an academic, really. They hold scholarships. So, they sit a scholarship exam when they come to the school, and then if they pass the exam, then they become scholars. They get a badge, but most of them don't seem to wear the badge. Apparently, it's uncool.

Will: [02:29]
They'll feel differently about that in a few years time, I'm sure. They'll be looking back and saying, "I wish I was wearing that thing."

Smith: [02:35]
Yeah, I hope they still will be. I hope they'll be cherishing it later on, and it will be a cool, kind of counter-cultural symbol.

Will: [02:40]
Oh I have no doubt, no doubt.

So, did you experience something like that when you were at school? Because I'm thinking back to my own experiences in the UK, and I had some great teachers, but I don't think we had anything quite as structured as that to engage students in intellectual work like that.

Smith: [02:59]
No, I went to a very different type of school.

So, I went to my local state comprehensive school, and they had some great teachers there, really great history teachers in particular, who really inspired me. But it's a very different setup. So, this type of school that I'm at now is a boarding school, and there's lots of events that are in the evenings as well for enrichment. So, there's the opportunity to do a lot more than one can do in a normal, kind of, state school in the UK. Yeah, it's probably fairly ... What we do is quite normal in the independent sector, but less common, perhaps, in the state sector. But my experience is ... quite a long time ago now. I think it's about 20 years ago. It may have changed. I don't want to give a false impression.

Will: [03:39]
So, when you were perhaps that age, was that when you first got interested in the Middle Ages? And, if so, what was the pathway for you?

Smith: [03:48]
It's something that I loved since I was a small child.

And I think some of the ... When I think back to my childhood, some of the key experiences were going to places like Bodiam Castle with my parents. So, going there with my mom and dad, and I remember getting to try on a medieval helmet and ... just those kind of experiences, really. I just found it fascinating at the time, and it's something that I never grew out of. I used to play with medieval Lego knights, and I loved that, and I loved Robin Hood when I was a kid. And there was always just that love ... I loved all history at the time. I was much more interested in a wider sweep of history, but I was always pulled to the Middle Ages. That was always the period that I was most fascinated by, and I can't really explain why. I don't have a rational reason as to why. It's just the period that I spend all my time thinking about, which I love.

And it developed, really, later on. So, when I was a teenager, there was a BBC History magazine article about the Crusades by Thomas Asbury, and it was supporting his book on the First Crusade, and I just devoured it. I was so interested by it. And I went and bought the book, and I read the book. And it was also the time that Kingdom of Heaven came out, and I saw that in cinema. And ... Yeah, I love Kingdom of Heaven. I'm a big fan of it. And it was ... that was the time my interest in the Crusades, specifically, coalesced. And then I went to university, and I did history, which was a broad course. I studied things like armored warfare and the wild west and things. But really, my love was

for the Middle Ages, and there was some great courses there. I did Crusades with Barbara Bombi, and I did Medieval monsters with Alex Bovie. And this was really formative, and just a wonderful time. And then I went from there to doing the masters in medieval history and the PhD, and then the research afterwards and continuing it since then. But it was always ... I think it always traced back to just that childhood love of the Middle Ages, which was really based on popular culture, really.

Will: [05:41]
I think that's a common pathway for a lot of people we've spoken to as well, that it begins with pop culture, things like Robin Hood—whether it's, the Errol Flynn films, or Disney versions, or anything like that—and then slowly you start to get deeper into it and it transforms into something a bit more rigorous and academic.
Pop culture has a lot to answer for, forcing so many people down this pipeline into being a medievalist.

Smith: [06:05]
Ha. Yeah, definitely.

Will: [06:08]
I have to ask as well—this is a silly question: Are you a Kingdom of Heaven purist? Are you an extended cut purist?

Smith: [06:16]
Oh, I appreciate both. I'm the Broad Church of Kingdom of Heaven. I think the extended cut is superior, of course, but I obviously saw the theatrical cut first and the extended cut's long, but it's incredible. It's such a great film and so, definitely extended cut. But the theatrical cut has a special place in my heart, of course.

Will: [06:31]
I'm glad I got that in. Sorry, Ben.

Ben: [06:34]
No, I also had Kingdom of Heaven follow up questions.

So, here's something ... I think, as a medievalist, you have a much greater knowledge of the crusading era, the crusader states, than most people, which allows you to enjoy and not enjoy a film like Kingdom of Heaven on a different level. I have encountered scholars who can't stand Kingdom of Heaven for its inaccuracies, for some of its decisions that it makes, right? Even though it's, again, trying to fit a story in a genre and make it entertaining and give people appropriate screen time, et cetera. I would like to hear, if you could: what plea might you have for your medieval historian colleagues to reconsider Kingdom of Heaven as an enjoyable piece of art?

Smith: [07:29]
Haha. That's a very good question. I think definitely one has to draw a line between the academic research and, as you say, a work of art, as a ... obviously a fictional film. So, I think it should be enjoyed on its own merits.
But also, I think that, if we think about ... one of the things I try and argue in my book, actually, is about the way you draw the line between fiction and reality in the Middle Ages. And, in the time of the Crusades, actually, that story world of the Crusades is so much more fluid than we might imagine, in the sense that they don't seem to draw such a dividing line between what is reality and what is fiction, actually. It's very much mixed up. And so, I think that actually ... that allows us, then, to enjoy, say, Kingdom of Heaven with a clear conscience because it doesn't matter if some details are slightly mixed up.

Will: [08:19]
No, I think that's a really fascinating take. Am I understanding you right, then, that you are almost trying to read it as a medieval text in itself?

Smith: [08:28]
I think you could definitely do that. It's obviously based very closely on William of Tyre's Chronicle, and a lot of it's taken from that. So, I think that's another reason why one could enjoy it with a clear conscience, that it's very clearly

based on the medieval primary source material. I guess the problem is that it doesn't have the analytical context to deconstruct the text, and so you would approach it in a different way. And I think, as long as we're not taking the film as history without questioning it, I think that's fine.

Will: [08:56]
Yeah.

Let's pivot slightly. I was wondering if you could just introduce for our audience the main theme—if you like—the abstract, the blurb of the book.

Smith: [09:08]
Yeah. So the book's really trying to do two things.

So, it is called *Rewriting the First Crusade*, and the reason for that is that it's thinking about how the letters from the First Crusade are rewritten a lot, and actually, as a cache of source material, are much more complex than they had previously been understood to be. So, they'd always been seen as being very straightforward reportage and trustworthy eyewitness accounts, and that you could trust the letters because they were documentary sources, and therefore they weren't subject to the same authorial agendas as the ... let's call them chronicle texts that are produced mostly in monastic communities.

Actually, they're rewritten a lot. So, that was really one of the reasons why the book's called *Rewriting the Crusade*. And it's about how monastic communities engage with the letters. They rewrite them, they create them from whole cloth. And it's just absolutely fascinating when you look at this source of material. It opens up a new way of thinking about the Middle Ages and letter writing culture and sources. Also, it rewrites some of the history of the First Crusade itself. So, some of the history of the expedition, parts of what happened on the First Crusade, were based purely on the evidence from the letters. So, if we identify a number of the letters—a pretty decent part of the collection—as being inventions or rewritings, then actually it rewrites the history of the crusade as well.

So, there's an example where the papal lege, Adam Lapu, apparently leaves the crusade in the Holy Land and goes over to Cyprus to write a letter with this Greek patriarch who's in exile there. And the letters are clearly inventions. And it made no sense that he would leave the crusade at this crucial time, and no other source attests to him leaving the crusade and sailing to Cyprus for a few months and then coming back. It makes no sense. So, that actually rewrites some of the history of what happens on the crusade.

So, really, it's about looking at letter writing culture in a different way. It's about looking at the letters from the First Crusade in a different way. It's about looking at the First Crusade itself in a slightly different way as well, and just nuancing our understanding of it.

Will: [11:17]
These letters that we have for so long taken to be objective sources about the First Crusade ... can you tell us a bit about the context of when they were originally written? I know we're talking now about a whole range of different contexts. But let's say, for example, letters which we believed were written during or around the First Crusade, those expeditions ... When were we imagining that they were written, in what kind of context and what materials were being used?

Smith: [11:44]
Yeah, such a great question. It's such a fascinating thing, really, to look at letter production in the Middle Ages, especially in the context of crusades.

So, I think we are conditioned to think of letters in the way that we engage with them in the modern world. So, we're thinking about a private letter that one writes to a close friend or family member, and one writes in a private mode, and one does it silently, and that letter gets read by that person alone. That's it.
In the Middle Ages, though, it's very different. We are thinking about a context in which there's probably communal production of letters. So, their named authors might be Stephen of Blois, for instance, the First Crusade leader. But

probably there are other people getting involved in the production of that letter, in terms of constructing its content and text and certainly in the way it's written down. So, probably the leaders of the First Crusade have got chaplains—so, clergymen—who are writing down the text of these letters. The question is: how much do they actually get involved in manipulating the text, and how much is it a dialogue between the scribes who are writing them and their authors, so to speak?

Now these are gonna be written down probably on wax tablets, we would think—using, like, a bronze stylus—and then, in note form. And then they're written up in neater form on parchment. The animal skin that they're written on is obviously very expensive, and this is particularly difficult to come by, I think, in a crusade army when you're on the march. So, at some point, these notes are taken and written up as a proper neat letter. And then you've got the whole problem of: how do you get this letter back to Europe from the Holy Land while you're in a war zone, basically? How do you do that?

Now, they can only send and receive letters at particular times. They're really looking for times when they've got access to a port, so that ... they've got ships coming in, maybe bringing recruits fresh recruits and supplies, and they can send a letter back on those ships that are going back to Europe. That seems to be when they're writing and receiving these letters. They then send them back. They obviously have to either employ someone on one of those ships to take them back, a third party, or perhaps one of the members of the household itself. And they obviously lose those members of the household from the crusade army, then.

So it's ... you've gotta really pick your time in terms of sending a letter. You're gonna lose perhaps several of your retainers who are going to take this letter with them, and they're going to then travel back to Europe. They've got to reach their destination and then give the letter to its intended recipient.

And then, again, it is much more communal in terms of the reception of the letter than we're conditioned to think of from modern letter writing. So, actually, although they would say Stephen of Blois ... again, he writes two letters to his wife, Adela in France. And actually, those letters are clearly intended for a much wider audience. And we've got to think about them being received in an oral mode of reception. So, they're being read aloud then, and they're also being copied very widely. These letters are objects of great interest for the people of Europe who are really interested in what's going on in the Crusade, especially after the success of the Crusade in capturing Jerusalem in 1099. And so, these proliferate, then, through the networks of the laity and the church and are being copied and shared in that way.

And then they enter into the, kind of, historical record. And that's how we engage with them today. We find them preserved in manuscript books along with other historical texts. So, they're very dynamic texts. And actually, what happens is ... what's really interesting ... One of the things I was really focusing on in the book was the manuscript transmission. So, of course, in this age of the Middle Ages, this is not an age of print yet. Every text is handwritten. And so what that means is it brings opportunities to change the text, to alter them, to cut bits out, to add things—basically, to alter them to fit one's context and interests. And they're very malleable. So, the plasticity of the letters means that people add things in, or they completely invent letters, or they cut things out, and they're very ... they're seen as vehicles, I think, for messages. And so, people are playing around with them.

So, each copy of the letter that we might encounter in the manuscript corpus is not necessarily the same. And actually, some of the things I've found, some of the discoveries in the book about, basically, new findings about the letters—and how they're constructed and which parts are authentic and which parts are added on later—comes from comparing those manuscripts and seeing this really vibrant textual culture that goes along with letter writing in the Middle Ages.

Ben: [16:17]
Fantastic. Yeah, we have a little bit of a fun ... I think you could describe this as a meta conversation about the First Crusade. We have these documents that ... some of them were there as these things were occurring. Some of them were then changed to shape how this event would be remembered as such a seminal event. You can understand why people would wanna change the perception of it or maybe add certain things to it.

I'd love to hear a fun example or two you wanna mention from the book, maybe one of your favorites, of how an individual or a group's motivation ended up tweaking the history of the First Crusade for future readers of these texts.
Smith: Yeah, that's such a great question, and it's one of the things I was really interested in.
It all went back, really, to the first ... how I got into the letters in the first place. So, I was working in Munich, in the library there, and I was teaching a course. And I wanted to show the students some of the great books about the Crusades manuscripts they have in the Bavarian State Library. And so, I was thinking, what have they got about the Crusades? And I found they had a First Crusade letter. And what was weird was the date was wrong on the catalog entry. And I was like, oh, this is kind of ... I definitely wanna see this. So, I pulled it up, and I looked at it. And I realized that actually the text was a variant one that hadn't been published before. And this was really exciting. I thought, wow, there can't be any anymore like this. This is a kind of once-in-a-career sort of discovery, because the First Crusades sources... there aren't any new ones out there to find, right? That's the assumption that everyone had had ... a lot of people have had before this.

Anyway, so, I compared the text, and I realized that, actually, this letter had been produced in Germany—or what's now modern Germany and Southern Austria—and that parts of the text have been manipulated to remove the mention of Norman and French Knights. And this is really interesting. And so, I thought, what's probably going on here is that this is produced in German monastic or German-speaking monastic communities slightly later on in the 13th century. And there's a slight embarrassment because there aren't really any unequivocally German leaders of the First Crusade. And, of course, by this stage, the Empire is massively involved in crusading. It's got these very impressive traditions. And at the time that this is produced, they're heavily invested in the Crusades ... in physical participation, as well as writing about them, and copying these texts. And so, I think what happens there is, they cut this bit about the Norman and French leaders so as to make it fit more in that general context of Teutonic participation in the Crusades.

And so, I think you see, then, what they're doing is they're altering it to fit their audience. It's really interesting. I think that tells us something then about how people are engaging with the crusade as an event, and a phenomenon, and also as history at the time.

Will: [19:01]
And so, how long would you say people were continuing to share these letters about the First Crusade? How many decades or even centuries went by when different groups were still adapting their materials?

Smith: [19:16]
Yeah. What's fascinating is, there's such a long historical afterlife for this material. So, of course, it's originally written between 1095 and 1100-1101, but actually, people are still copying this stuff up into the 15th century. And you can see, then, what I tried to do is to trace the waxing and waning interest in the letters and the copying of it. And what does that tell us about society at the time? So, you get the most intense copying in the 12th century in this immediate afterglow of the capture of Jerusalem in 1099. This is very much celebratory copying, I think. And I would see ... what I say in the book is that, actually, they're copying these letters as a means of devotion to God, but also as a means of engaging with participating in the crusade and actually furthering the crusade movement, that it's very closely associated with the liturgy and praying for the success of crusades. And these two things go hand in hand with each other.

During the 13th century, they're still copying. There's a lot of crusading activity going on, so they're copying lots of these letters, but it is a very different context. They've lost Jerusalem by this stage, after 1187 when Saladin conquers Jerusalem. And so, I think then they're copying the letters, but really in a bittersweet way of looking back and thinking this is what we had. This letter recounts the capture of Jerusalem. Hopefully this will inspire people to go on crusade and to recapture Jerusalem.

And then, in the 14th century, crusading in the Holy Land sort of dips off a little bit, crusading in other theaters proliferates, and you get fewer copies of these texts. And then, suddenly, bam, in the 15th century, you're starting to get a lot more copying of this because you're getting the rediscovery of First Crusade texts around this time, especially texts like Robert the Monk. And this is in response to the threat of the Osman Turks. It was starting to press on the

boundaries of Europe. And so, they're returning to this material and using it to help inspire crusading activity. So you suddenly see a spike in the copying.

So, it's really interesting. It's a very uneven pattern, which I think reflects the interests and concerns of society and Europe over the centuries. But from about 1095 into the 15th century, they have a very long afterlife and a lot of interest.

Will: [21:26]
I think that's very ... well, it's so interesting because I'm seeing ... just coming from my own sort of area of research, which is more homiletics, I'm seeing so many interesting overlaps. Our modern understanding of what letters are and what they do, I think, is different—as you've already really eloquently said—to how they function in the medieval world. And there's that communal element, which you've spoken to. And then, you've also gestured there to this fact that, when you are receiving a letter—in the same way that when you receive a homily—you are participating in the letter and participating in the homily.

So, you're essentially furthering that crusade even in the ... wherever it is ... in the church or the court or a meeting hall of some kind. There's that idea that letters are a way of spreading a message in a very ... almost a very tangible way. And it seems like this is something which ... it doesn't come immediately to us when we think of letters and how they function in the modern age.

Smith: [19:15]
Yeah, exactly. And I think what's really interesting is seeing the ways in which the communities engage with the letters. It shows us how widespread crusading activity is, and actually how it's not just confined to picking up a sword and going to the East.

There's loads of examples we could look at, but just to pick a few, there's the most famous letter which regales audiences in the West with the capture of Jerusalem. What's really interesting is, very quickly after it starts to circulate in the West, it gets two postscripts added onto it. The first postscript seems to be added on really quickly, right at the end of the First Crusade, and it's talking about returning veterans from the crusade. And it's saying, "you should give them money," basically, "pay off their debts and give them arms and that you'll receive a part of the penance as well." So, there's that way of participating in the crusades by contributing, by giving veterans donations as they return.

And then there's a second postscript, which is added, I think, also pretty quickly afterwards as the letter begins to circulate. And this time, what it does is it compiles a hand list of the major dates of key battles and sieges during the crusade. And why would you do this? I think the answer is, so that you can celebrate those Christian successes on the days that they happen. So, this becomes part of this para-liturgy that Cecilia Gaposchkin has researched. And then, actually, you would probably be celebrating these alongside feast days. You would celebrate the capture of Jerusalem, the capture of Antioch, and so on. So, there's multiple different ways of engaging with them.

Another way that's really interesting is they function as memorial sites as well. So, prayer is obviously crucial—as we've been talking about—in terms of a way of engaging with God in the Middle Ages. And actually, in these letters, what happens is, there's one letter by Anselm of Ribemont, who's a really key leading knight on the expedition, and he asked audiences to pray for the crusaders. This is one of their main concerns. Pretty much all the letters they send back, they're asking for prayers on their behalf. So we ... it's a dialogic thing as well. We know that people are praying in the West as well. There are lots of letters where they organize batteries of prayer to support the crusaders. And then, what happens in his letter ... In one manuscript, he asks for prayer, and someone has added in an extra section silently at the end, pretending to be Anselm of Ribemont, saying, "This is a list of all the crusaders who fell at the siege of Antioch. Pray for them." And so, what's going on then is, actually, this is a dialogue between audiences and authors, who are the crusaders, basically. And this crusading activity is on the page. It's in the cloister. It's at home. It's on the Eastern front as well, of course, in the Holy Land. But it's very much dialogic. It's about communities communicating with one another, and the letters are the key means of doing that.

And they're a type of source material that probably hasn't been factored into the discussion as much as they should have been. I think scholars of the Crusades have tended to gravitate more towards, what we might term, the long form chronicle narratives of the Crusades. And the letters have been ... not neglected, but they've been seen, I think, as supplementary sources, and ones where we can cherry-pick examples that don't appear in the longer sources. And what my book is arguing is, actually, we've got to put those letters in a central position in terms of understanding the Crusades, and also, I think, wider medieval history as well.

Letters are ... There are a lot of people working on letters, but actually, there's no big book about letters in the Middle Ages, which takes, kind of, everything. There's some edited collections, which are wonderful, but that book is still yet to be written. And I think they're still seen in some ways as supplementary sources, which is a real shame.

Will: [25:55]
You anticipated a question I was gonna ask, but it was gonna be a really mean question, so now I don't have to ask it. But it's exactly that of how far, or to what extent, you think this is also seen in other parts of medieval studies, where the letters aren't given enough attention.

Smith: [26:12]
Yeah, I think that's definitely a thing. I can't understand why there's not a book about letters generally, and I think what I'm hoping that my book would do is that, if you're interested in letter writing culture, hopefully it offers a way into thinking about the letters. And really looking at the manuscript context is crucial and just really problematizing that idea of where the line should be drawn between fiction and reality and how people are engaging with them, and how ... They are social media, in the sense that it's not just a letter is written and then it's received, and then everyone just receives it as is. They're very much engaging with them and changing them.

So I ... that's what I would really say, is they're very dynamic documents. And there is great research going on into letters more broadly, and they are used a lot, but I think they don't quite have that central position that, say, chronicles do, which is a shame.

Ben: [26:59]
I also love how you describe these positive ways that communities are using these texts for their benefit and for their purposes. I think—and I'm sure we've all come across this as we try to explain some of this massaging of text, enhancing text, editing texts to modern audiences—there's an assumption that there's something nefarious afoot. There's some ... it's a forgery, there's some plot, they're trying to twist people's words ... as if someone were to edit a modern letter or someone's editing emails or text, there's something, there's always, okay, what are they up to? What are they hiding? What narrative are they trying to create? How this ... how during, in this culture at this time, there's just a different relationship with the written words and with, again, these kinds of documents, this genre of text, than we have today, which can be a little bit of a stumbling block, to get people to not see, again, that these are very well-meaning people that are tweaking these things and they're trying to help their audiences better understand and enhance their knowledge rather than obscure it. They're not thinking about us as historians, centuries later, trying to piece back together what happened, right? They're thinking about their context

Smith: [28:17]
I think that's such a great point.

Ben: [28:20]
And yeah, fun for us to peel back the various layers of texts like these and try to learn different things about the onion, which comes to ... all of my mixed metaphors ...

This work is deeply rooted in a lot of focused manuscript projects. I'd love to hear a little bit just about the nuts and bolts of how you were able to get hands on and get time with these things, with your other work duties and schedule, how that process went ... if it was, okay this one was an easy one, the rest were smooth, or, Hey, this group was very difficult. Were there any that, once you got in front of, they were very intimidating? Was there a lot of digital manuscripts you were able to look at? I'd just love to hear about that process.

Smith: [29:10]
Yeah, sure. So, I love working with manuscripts. I think it's so exciting, and I think it's a real tangible link back to the Middle Ages. And it's wonderful to be able to see them in person when one can, and I saw quite a few of them in person. I was really privileged to be able to do that and saw quite a lot in Germany. And yeah, it was a wonderful experience.

And I think nothing ... it does lend a sort of a different perspective and understanding of them, being able to turn the pages and hold the manuscript as a physical artifact and experience its materiality. And also to see in a very physical way what other texts it's with. I think that's the really interesting thing is looking at the manuscript as this wrapper around the text. What other text is it circulating with? And I think when one uses digital manuscripts, it can be harder sometimes to get a sense of the whole because ... a lot of digitizations are brilliant, if it's the whole manuscript, and you can replicate that to an extent. But sometimes, if you're ordering a digitization of a couple of leaves, then of course you don't get that same sense. You can look at the catalog, but you don't get quite the same sense.

One has to be realistic, and research funding is not limitless. And I think that there are certain things that go along with being able to visit these archives in person, and I was very fortunate to be able to do that for a lot of them. But a lot of them as well I did look at online in digital repositories, downloading digitizations, ordering digitizations, and they were so useful to work with. But it was really helpful to obviously to have looked at lots in person as well

In terms of surprises and things, I ... so there was one which I was incredibly excited about. So, it was in [???], and it was listed as being a single-sheet letter from the First Crusade from the 12th century. And I was so excited to see this, and I thought, oh my God, this is going to be ... maybe not the actual letter that they send back from the ... I knew it had the postscripts, but I thought, this is going to be actually like a single-sheet letter that circulated in the Middle Ages and has been preserved in this archive. And when I got the digitization, it was a wonderful manuscript, but it was just simply a single-sheet that had been extracted from a book, so it wasn't ... I thought this was, like, the physical letter that people had handed around, and then it turned out to be from a book. But it was still really exciting, and I found out some great stuff from it. So, that was a surprise, which I didn't realize until I looked at it.

There was ... I'm trying to think of some other ones. There were, just ... what was really exciting was finding new manuscripts that hadn't been taken into account by previous editors. And also, when I found that these manuscripts differed ... so, when I was comparing them and finding that, this manuscript actually preserves an older version of a text, and that proved, then, that the newer version that scholars had always used actually had these new layers added to it—as you say, these new bits added on. So, it was really exciting, as you said, peeling back those layers of the onion. It is getting back to the original.

And what I'm really careful to do is not to discard those layers. I think one could very easily say, this is an addition, so this isn't of as much value as the original part. But I think they're both of value. I'm really interested in finding out: What did they actually write on the First Crusade? But also, what are people ... how are people engaging with it? What are they adding to them? And also, this stuff they're adding, this is probably stuff that's from lost oral cultures about the crusade. So, this list of people who die at Antioch, that's added on to Anselm of Ribemont's letter. Where's that coming from? Is that coming from a returning veteran of the crusade? Is it coming from another letter that's now lost, or some sort of note that's now been lost? So, I think that's really fascinating, trying to recover this lost world. And I think looking at the manuscripts is such an exciting way to just get one step closer towards that.

Will: [32:43]
One of the challenges, though, of using manuscripts in archives is that, sometimes, you are a little bit restricted by the information that's available through things like the databases that are out there. And I was wondering whether, with a corpus like this, when you are looking at letters—which are probably appearing in a whole range of different kinds of manuscripts, whether they're together with other letters or homilies or parts of chronicles, what have you—were there ever times when you went into an archive expecting to find one thing, and found that it was totally different, whether positively or negatively? That perhaps the entry in the catalog that had been written 200 years ago by a well-meaning librarian was not entirely accurate?

Smith: [33:30]
I think, yeah, to go back to that example in Munich, that first one that I found had obviously the wrong date on it, and that kinda aroused my suspicion and interest, looking at that. So, definitely, I think. To be honest, most of the catalogs are really good. I don't have too many quibbles, to be honest. But I think what was exciting as well was looking at ... there was one manuscript ... so the previous editor of the letters, Heinrich Hagemeyer, did this incredible job, published it in 1901. It was amazing. It's still the standard edition for a lot of the letter text from the First Crusade letters. But, because he was reliant upon these 19th century modes of communication and travel, he hadn't seen a lot of the manuscripts in person. I think he probably saw a few of them in person, actually. And what was really interesting is that there was ... so, I found a new copy of one of the First Crusade letters in the same codex that he had used to make his edition. So, he knew about one First Crusade letter in the manuscript, but didn't know about a second one. And it was in the same manuscript, but I think he hadn't seen that one in person. I think he had been supplied information by ... he had this great web of contacts who provided him with transcriptions of letters. And he knew about the one letter, and maybe they didn't send on the information about the second one, and so he didn't know about it. And so, that was a really exciting discovery.

And I think the key thing is just that there's actually so much more manuscript material out there that hasn't been taken into account. I think it's rare to find something completely new, in the sense of "no one knew this text existed." But what I found with the letters from the First Crusade and other First Crusade texts is actually there are lots of manuscripts out there that had not been taken into account by scholars who are working on the Crusades, because they didn't appear in these 19th-century grand editions and the scholarship afterwards ... I think there was a sense that the spadework with the manuscripts had been done, and now what we do is we analyze these texts, and we work on them, and we don't look so much at the manuscripts. And I was really just so excited to find there's so much stuff out there. What I really hope is that the book will inspire other people to go and look for new manuscripts too, that they'll find new stuff. And maybe even some new First Crusade letters or manuscripts will come to light. So I really hope that this will lead to further manuscript discoveries as well.

Will: [35:44]
I think that's a wonderful ... it's wonderful that, in a sense, your book is trying to begin or continue a conversation. And in a way, it's replicating the very work that these letters were doing. It's creating community, it's spurring people on to action ... their own academic crusade into the archives to find their own epistles and documentary evidence.

Smith: [36:02]
That's a really nice way of thinking. I hadn't thought about it like that. Yeah, I think the problem is that, I think, if you write a book that is the absolute final word on a subject, then you've killed it off. You've killed your field off a bit. And I didn't want to do that. I hope that what this does is it opens up pathways of thinking about letters more broadly, about the Crusades, about the First Crusade, and also about manuscript cultures, and that hopefully it'll spin off and give people food for thought to work on with other material.

Will: [36:29]
That's wonderful. There's one more question I'd just like to ask before I think we pivot to talking a bit more about how you balance your academic research with your work at rugby school. But I think it ties nicely to this idea of trying to get more people interested in this work and doing their own research.

I'm wondering about the languages that you were using in your research. So, I'm assuming—but perhaps I'm totally wrong—that the vast majority of these letters that are copied are still in Latin, but perhaps they also get translated into vernaculars. And I was wondering if you could talk a bit about the languages you had to engage with and whether that would also be part of broader research ... that maybe there would be other parts of the world these letters have traveled to, that have been translated into surprising languages that we haven't yet discovered.

Smith: [37:15]

Yeah. So, there's some really ... most of ... yeah, they're all in Latin ... basically is the language of the letters. But what's really interesting is that there were some translations into vernacular as well, as you say, and into German ... was a bigger one. But there weren't as many copies in vernacular. They were basically pretty much all in Latin.

What's really interesting is, when you think about the ... there were three letters from ... allegedly about the ... from the east, from Byzantium, that sort of engaged with the launch of the Crusade. And they've been translated .... they exist in Latin, but scholars have said they're probably translations from original Greek letters. And there was big question marks about whether in fact or not they're [???] ... that I argue that they're not. They're confections. All three letters from Byzantium about the First Crusade are confections created by western monastic audiences. But there was that really interesting question about language and translation that opened up myriad of possibilities for whether they might be authentic.

Because if they're based on a Greek original but translated into Latin, who makes that translation? Does it abide by the chancery norms of Byzantium and so on? So, there's a really interesting question about that. And there's ... again, as way of thinking about these texts and how dynamic they are, if we look at Papal crusade calls, where the papacy is really interested and concerned with making sure that people just read their letters out, and you have these letters from Innocent III later on in the 13th century, and Gregory the ninth saying, "Do not change the content of these letters. Just read them verbatim aloud." But, of course, if you're reading them in Latin, then you are not able to engage part of your audience. And so, we know that they're translated into vernacular. And there's one later crusade call from the later 1200s, which is Latin on one side and in German on the other. And what's really interesting ... of course, that process of translation is a real art, and it means that it's not quite the same. So, the messages they're producing and disseminating in these letters, when they enter into translation, are not quite the same as the author intends.

And again, that just fits into that dynamism and plasticity of the letters, which makes them so fascinating. And just using them as a way to think about that, those lost oral cultures that surround and produce the letters, I think that was really captivating.

Ben: [39:34]
Before we pivot to your other ... the other aspects of your work, I do wonder what you hope your ... or, you've already mentioned several ... but I think as our audience has a rough conception of the First Crusade and how the successes of the First Crusade might be remembered in the subsequent years in the Western Christendom, what might you want to add or to change about the picture that the average person you meet has about the First Crusade?

Smith: [40:07]
That is a great question.

I think I would like them to think about how the ... about how this line between fiction and reality is more blurred at the time, and that the source material is more complex than we might first have imagined, and that, yeah, it's ... I think to approach the material on its own terms and to accept that and to allow for that and to account for it, I think allows us to approach the material closer to the way that medieval audiences did as well. And so, I think that's where I'd be more interested in those kind of story-worlds around the crusade, and that, actually, the medieval conception of what happens on the First Crusade is maybe slightly different from modern scholars. I think that's probably what I would like to take away, and also that just the letters and the sources that the history is based upon is so complex and so open to interpretation.

And also that ... There's that really famous account of the Crusaders. So, when they capture Jerusalem, they commit this horrific massacre of the population inside. It's very bloody, very gory. In the sources, they talk about how the Crusader Knights are riding up to the knees of their horses in blood. And that actually first appears in one of the letters. So, I think most people have engaged with that idea from the chronicle sources, but actually, it first appears in the letters, and as some scholars have pointed out, that is actually a biblical reference. And it is a terrible massacre, and it is bloody. This idea that it's apocalyptic levels of blood, where they're literally wading through it up to the knees of their horses, is a reference to the Bible.

And so, the way ... the people who are constructing these sources, and ultimately what we know about what happens on the crusade, is framed in that context of biblical knowledge in a culture that we are trying to access and we can get very close to, but who we'll never be able to access it in the same way as medieval people did. And I think just being careful with what actually happens on the crusade and how some of them are just topoi, basically, that medieval audiences would've recognized.

And I think it also goes back to your point about ... earlier, Ben ... about how the ... I think medieval audiences probably know that people are playing with their letters, and that, actually, we see them as being "fixed," and, you shouldn't mess around with this, and you shouldn't change anything ... But actually, I think, if authors and audiences are all operating in a different letter-writing culture, where they're expecting this, that actually it's not such a problem for them, and they wouldn't maybe approach them with the same questions and hesitations that we do. And so, I think just thinking about the problematic aspects of the source material and its complexity, and just trying to account for that, and approach it in a way that's closer to medieval audiences.

Will: [42:48]
As we're getting towards the end—because we know ... we're conscious of time and wanna make sure that you still have an evening to enjoy—we'd love to talk a little bit about your experiences now teaching the Crusades, and how you go about doing that. And I suppose the first place I'd like to begin is ... you were ... before you went to rugby school—where you've been since, I believe, 2019. Is that correct?

Smith: [43:11]
That's correct.

Will: [43:13]
You were at Trinity College, Dublin. So, obviously, you've gone from teaching undergraduate students—so, 18 to 21-22ish—to now teaching at Rugby, which teaches students from about 13 to 18. So, we're talking ... secondary school to sixth form college in the UK—so I guess middle school to high school for the US context.

I'd love to know how you've had to adapt your teaching, what you focus on differently—if you are still teaching the same kind of topics. Or maybe you've had to totally pivot away from certain elements of the medieval world, because it just, it doesn't quite ... Yeah, do things work better or worse depending on the group?

Smith: [43:54]
I think they're remarkably similar, to be honest. I think ... I love teaching a lot. It's one of my favorite things. I really ... I genuinely enjoy doing it, which is why I wanted to work at Rugby.

I think the big difference is scale. So, at Trinity, which was a wonderful place to work, I remember giving lectures to ... it was probably like 140 people in the room, and ... which was terrifying the first time. I walked in to give lectures, and I was like, "Wow, I've never seen that many people in a room before." It was really scary. But it was enormous fun as well. And that mode was ... you did have seminars as well, small group seminars, which is very similar to the way that I'm teaching now. But there was that sort of big audience and that element of lecturing, which I don't have anymore. It's now ... it's all small group teaching.

And I really think it's just about scale ... is really the difference. And actually the content you're teaching is pretty similar. You're looking to get ... I think a lot of people don't have a lot of experience with the Middle Ages before they come to a university or a college, I think probably. And actually, you are looking at getting people up to speed with something that's quite new to them. So, I think the challenges are really quite similar and the teaching is enormous fun at the school. I really enjoy it. Like, the people were really fun to teach, and you have some great discussions. And, actually, the kind of questions they ask are ... I wouldn't say are very different from the sort of questions you might discuss at university. And I really try and bring that university teaching style to the school. So, we do a lot of small group seminar discussion, ask them the same kind of questions, and we might think about provenance.

And so, in the UK, we do A-level history, Sixth form. So, this is the qualification before you go to university. And actually, it's pretty advanced. I know that the A in A-level stands for "advanced," but since I did A-level years ago and coming back to it … it's really pretty impressive—what they have to know about, and the complexity and nuance they have to show. So, actually, the skills they're acquiring are really impressive, and I didn't quite appreciate that before I came to teach at a school. So, I think there's lots of scope.

I think as long as you're putting the grounding in for an audience that maybe hasn't experienced the Middle Ages very much, that you can get them up to speed very quickly and then start to ask really interesting questions. And I think it's just a matter of taking complex source material that feels maybe quite alien to the pupils at first, and just giving them a way into it, and then actually putting out these big themes—like power and authority and gender and so on—and then you can really start to ask interesting questions and have really interesting discussions. And it's really great fun. So, I don't really think there's that much difference at all. I think it's just a matter of scale, I think.

Will: [46:31]
And were there, then, preconceptions you found students coming into these classes with about the Middle Ages that you … that either were somewhat accurate or were totally inaccurate? I'm just curious about what they are walking into these classrooms for the first time thinking about the Middle Ages.

Smith: [46:46]
Yeah, I think the big one, which we've alluded to already in discussion, is about the medieval church and what that is as an institution and what it does. And I really saw this teaching at university and at schools as well. I think that there's a tendency to … I think in popular culture and movies and books, I think a lot of them portray the medieval church as this quite cynical institution that is exploiting and manipulating people for their own ends. You often see this kind of topos of the character of the rich bishop who doesn't really believe in God and is just exploiting their flock, and you get that in TV and movies and books and so on.

And I think it's quite difficult … I think often for people new to studying the Middle Ages to get to an understanding of medieval religion that's closer to how medieval people saw it. And I think trying to strip away those kind of cynical aspects of … and not seeing the church as something which is a cynical, manipulative institution. And this is … I had some discussion today with my students about this and one of them made this great point—the same thing—that, actually, we shouldn't see the church in this way, and, actually, if, say, the people who are promoting the Crusades—the Pope, and we were talking about Bernard of Clairvaux and the Second Crusade—that actually their genuine belief is that they're saving people's souls by inviting them to go on the crusade. And it was a really engaging discussion.

And I think what we're trying to do is … Popular culture is … We've come full circle really to the start of our discussion about popular culture and how crucial it is for getting people into the Middle Ages. But also some aspects do need tweaking, then, in terms of how that changes people's understanding of what the Middle Ages are actually like. And I think religion is the key one that's maybe challenging to approach at first. Definitely.

Will: [48:28]
That's fascinating. I also … it suggests to me that the … I think the work that your book does as well ties into this idea that perhaps people may assume, as you say, there's a cynical church, a manipulative church, and therefore a very docile and easily manipulated populace who all think the same way and kind of can be herded like sheep. But actually, I think that the letters which you are researching in your book, other cases—I'm thinking in my own research letters written by members of the church who are complaining about the behavior of secular monks who are indulging in drunkenness or whatever it is … the point is, the people then were as varied and as prone to cynicism or prone to genuine faith as we are today. And so, wanting to step away from this idea of the Middle Ages, that dark age where people were in some way simpler than they are today.

Smith: [49:28]
Totally. I think that's such a good point.

And I think that they are questioning the world around them all the time. They're just using different frameworks. So, you are questioning through the framework of theology, instead of what we might understand as modern science. But they're asking all these questions about how many angels can fit on a pinhead, and so these kind of questions. They are very much thinking about the world around them in a very critical, independent way. And they're engaged in this critical discourse. But, for us, that may not look like what our modern conceptions of science is. And that's a problem, I think, that actually we shouldn't see them as being simpler than us.

And actually they've ... I think if you took a medieval person and a modern person today and they were faced with some sort of apocalyptic situation, they had to survive, I think I bet my money on the medieval person. I think it depends how one rates knowledge as well and how one values it. And actually, all this knowledge about the natural world and farming and the world around you and the seasons, and, how do you build shelter or cook a meal on open fire? Like these are ... or hunt animals? Like these are questions which I think a lot of modern people probably wouldn't be able to answer.

But I think it's just that our lives have changed so much. And so I think that's such an important point, not seeing medieval people as unquestioning, which I think is a really great point.

Ben: [50:39]
Yeah. Before we wrap up, I'm always curious ... This book is fantastic. I highly recommend it to our audience. And I'm always so impressed with the fruit of so much research coming out of someone who also has a teaching load and also has, I'm sure, departmental responsibilities. If you could speak ... How, in a week, does your personal research fit into your workflow schedule of teaching, and I'm sure having other kinds of conversations with students and your other colleagues and all the hats you have to wear?

Smith: [51:13]
Yeah, great question. So, my life now is very cyclical, and it's very much predicated upon routine, which I love. So, I'm really pleased about that.

So, basically, it falls into the term time. So, during term time, I can't do any research at all. The most I might be able to squeeze is maybe, on a Sunday afternoon, I might squeeze like some proof corrections or something, like something very small. It's okay to do that sort of work, which is, you can just pick it up and put it down quite quickly. I can maybe squeeze an hour or two on a weekend, maybe a Sunday to do something like that. But really, during teaching, you just don't have the capacity or the time or the mental bandwidth for it. You're just exhausted.

So, it's very much something that I do in the holidays. That's when I do my research, really. It's just in the holidays. And actually, that suits me quite well, because, thinking back to doing my PhD, I remember it's hard work, because you're trying to churn this stuff out, and it's what you do all day, every day. And there's very little break from that. You're just stuck with this thesis that you're trying to wrestle into submission. And it's difficult to keep up the motivation when you're working on something like that with no other break from that. And I think what I really like about my situation now is ... so, I have that teaching period when I'm just teaching, and then when I go into the holidays, I do my research during that time.

And it's really nice and I really value it then, because instead of having slogged through writing the whole year, I'm just working in this sort of more intense mode for, I don't know, four weeks or eight weeks or something, where I'm just writing and researching. And I really love that. And I have times, of course, when ... it's very cyclical and sometimes it just doesn't work at all, and I can't produce anything, and it's really frustrating. And other times when I'll be really productive, and I'll write more than I expect. And I think just going with those cycles, I think, and not being too hard on oneself.

I think that some of it is about just churning it out. And I think, if you can just say, I'm just going to write a thousand words today, even if they're not the greatest words ever, but I'll get something down and edit it later. I think that is how you build up stuff over time and you build confidence and think, oh, I wrote this many thousand words. I think that's really crucial. But sometimes, there is that inspiration that one needs, or sometimes one just can't produce anything.

And I think one has to go with that and listen to one's body and take a break and then get to a stage where one is inspired again. And then, I think, to really go for it.

So, I very much like that kind of cyclical aspect that I have, which is peculiar in a way, I think, to the context that I'm working in a boarding school, basically.

Will: [53:42]
So there's a message there for any grad students who are listening that it's okay to just take the break and to be kind to yourself, because it is, as you say ... even if you've got the routine and the pattern, there are days where it just does not come.

Smith: [53:59]
Totally. I think just be kind to yourself, definitely. And I think that's so crucial, because I think it can be a really lonely road doing the PhD and the postdoc route. And yeah, it is different. Doing something ... what you're doing, this intellectual labor ... is enormous, and it is really hard to do. And I think that, yeah, when it's not flowing, I think definitely trying to go take a break, find some inspiration somewhere, go to a museum or read a book or something and just, and wait for it to come back, and then really go for it, I think.

But definitely not to beat oneself up about the days when it just doesn't flow. I think that's fine. I think also alternating then, I think. If you reckon trying to see oneself in the third person, and I think if you can imagine yourself in a third person way and you can see, oh, I'm not actually being productive; I'm not producing anything. Then maybe one needs to shift gear and maybe do some reading instead. If you're not producing anything from writing and it's just not working that day, then maybe go and do some reading instead and take some notes and just come back to it when it's working, I think.

Will: [54:57]
I like that we're ending with a note of self-care.

Ben: [54:59]
Yes.

Smith: [55:00]
Totally.

Will: [55:02]
It's important. It's absolutely vital, and, yeah, I think a really important message to share, because the PhD is ... it's rewarding, but it's a tough slog, and I think it can be difficult to explain to people who haven't gone through a humanities PhD. Every PhD is different, everyone's experience is different. But for those who haven't gone through a humanities PhD, I imagine ... in much the same way that it might be difficult sometimes to imagine what does it mean when you do four, eight weeks of research? It's hard to really conceptualize that. And of course, I imagined that, for those four to eight weeks of research you do, there's also the prep work that goes into that. So, there's the grant applications, which are being done through term time to get the funding to go to Munich or Vienna or wherever it is you need to go. So, even though it's a cyclical thing, as you say, I imagine it also is trickling down throughout the year. The research ... getting ready for the research is also quite time consuming.

Smith: [56:00]
Yeah. And sometimes those things come back to bite you as well. So, you submit your chapter or article and you think, great, this is off my desk. I've done this, and it's finished. And then you go back to teaching. And then you obviously get it back in the middle of term time with a load of corrections. You've gotta somehow get to London or something to do some research. Like it's ... it can be tricky to fit things around one schedule, I think. But yeah, I definitely think that ...

It's also tricky, I think, especially doing a PhD, because the job market's so horrific. And I think that one of the key, the other key pieces of advice, which I got from a great friend of mine who ... [???] Dale ... who said to me that there are

many ways of being a historian. And I think that really resonated with me and was one of the reasons why I decided not to continue to pursue, like, trying to get a job in academia. And I decided to make a switch to teaching in secondary schools instead. Actually, I think there are so many more ways of being a historian now. There's the public history, the podcast, the magazines, the trade books, the engagement with schools, and it is not just about getting a job in a university.

And I think that the more we can decouple success in academia from getting like a tenured lectureship, I think is a good thing. And I think that there's so many great people out there doing great work, and I think that there are many ways to be a historian, and I think really to pursue them and to just try and enjoy doing the history, and I think to try and shut out those ... the quite depressing aspects of the academic job market, and I think the more we can do to decouple those metrics of success from, a very fixed idea of what it is to be a historian, I think that's a really great thing, and I fully endorse that.

Will: [57:42]
I think it's a wonderful place to end. I think that's a really important message to finish with.

Ben: [57:47]
Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our time. Dr. Smith, we will include a link to your book as well as a link to your personal website in the information that goes along with this podcast. Is there anywhere else online you'd like to direct our listeners to learn more about you or your work?

Smith: [58:03]
Probably just on Instagram. So I'm @medieval_tom, so that's medieval underscore Tom. And I post a lot of stuff on there. That's a good place to find me. I've got some links as well there.

Ben: [58:12]
Great. We'll link to that as well.

Will: [58:14]
Thank you again, Dr. Smith for joining us today, and thank you all for listening and we'll see you next time in the Middle Ages.