Meeting in the Middle Ages
Interview with Dr. Thomas Burman, 04/05/23

Will: [00:05]
Hi, I'm Will Beattie.

Ben: [00:06]
I'm Ben Pykare.

Will: [00:07]
And we are two graduate students at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.

Ben: [00:11]
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: [00:20]
Well, today we're sitting down with Dr. Thomas Burman, Professor of History and Director of the Medieval Institute here at the University of Notre Dame. We'll be talking about his recent book he co-authored, *The Sea in the Middle: The Mediterranean World from 650-1650*.

Will: [00:35]
Well, then, let's go and meet him in the Middle Ages.

Ben: [00:38]
Good morning, Professor Burman. Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down and chat with us.

Burman: [00:45]
Well, thank you very much. And thanks for the pastry I'm just now finishing.

Ben: [00:51]
Haha sorry, we'll let you finish. Yeah, you have taken maybe the shortest journey of any of our guests, from the seventh floor here in Hesburgh Library, down to the sixth floor. And we're so glad you did. A question we like to start off with: as you are in social situations out in the world, and people ask you, "What do you do for a living?" How do you tackle that question to just a random stranger.

Burman: [01:22]

Well, I usually say that I teach at a university. And then they say ... they *might* say ... they don't always, "What do you teach?" And I just ... and then I say, "I teach history." And then sometimes they say, "What kind of history?" And then I say, "medieval history." So, I let them kind of guide how much they really want to know, because often it's not very much. You know, they see, "teach history," and it's like, "Oh, I hated history," and they don't want to talk about it any further.

Will: [02:00]
They're having traumatic flashbacks.

Burman: [02:02]
But, on the other hand, sometimes people are just very, very interested indeed, and they want to know, "Medieval history? What kind of medieval history? Oh, that's really cool."

Ben: [02:12]
So yeah, yeah, I was wondering if ... maybe if "history" didn't spark joy, if "medieval" perhaps would spark interest.

Burman: [02:18]
Ah, that's interesting. So, maybe I should try that and start with "medieval history" and give it a little bit narrower range and see what the reaction is. Good suggestion, yeah.

Ben: [02:33]
Yeah. Now, if you were at a conference and a colleague was unfamiliar with who you were and said, "What do you work on?" How would you ... how do you typically answer that question?

Burman: [02:43]
Well, I usually say that I am a historian—an intellectual historian—of Christian, Muslim, Jewish relations in the Mediterranean, especially the western Mediterranean. That's kind of how I define myself these days.

Ben: [02:57]
Yeah, yeah. Has that changed a lot throughout your career?

Burman: [03:01]
Well, it's interesting. I mean, I started out thinking I was focusing on the history of medieval Spain, which I kind of was, but, in a way, I wasn't, because I wasn't particularly caught up in the big intellectual questions that historians of medieval Spain—especially those in Spain itself—were asking. I was really much more interested in a broader range of ... *How is European Latin Christianity interacting with the religions around it?* And so, whereas my first book focused on the Arab Christians, the Muslim Arabs of Spain, my second focused on the Latin Christian encounter with the Quran, whether that happened in Spain—and a big part of it did, especially the translation of it, but a lot of it happened all over the rest of Europe.

[04:13] So, and then, as I, along with colleagues ... we talked more and more about, you know, really, we need to think of the discipline of medieval studies expanding in certain directions. And, one way or another, if you work in Spain—and you work on both sides of the sort of Muslim-Christian divide, as I did—you become very conscious of a Mediterranean world, that that Spain is just one corner of. And, gradually, geographically, I did begin to develop a more precise, I guess, geographical focus, that takes in, we might say, all of Western Europe and the Mediterranean in one, you know ... through one lens. And so, yeah, it's gradually changed over time, which, you know, that happens to most scholars, one way or the other.

Ben: [05:20]
Yeah, and I think it's a ... it's definitely an interesting shift to see, like, maybe a national focus, right? Where you say "Spain," in the modern mind, we have a conception of a place, of a people, of even a language, whereas you talk about, you know, "Western Latin Christianity," or you talk about "the Mediterranean world" ... we're broadening, but we're ... I don't know, these national, modern categories are, like, helpful and harmful sometimes.

Burman: [05:55]
Of course, yeah.

Ben: [05:56]
Right? And ... yeah, I'm excited, as I'm enjoying having a broader scope, and I ... yeah, appreciate your work in doing that and then talking about that.

Burman: [06:09]
Well, thank you.

Ben: [06:10]
Of course.

Will: [06:12]
As someone who studies some, you know, history a little bit further north, how much does your work touch on things that are happening with these kind of interactions in, say, Northwestern Europe? Is it a point of contact in your research?

Burman: [06:28]
It is ... at least in this way. You know, in this new textbook that Brian Catlos and Mark Meyerson and I have written, one of the things that one will notice if one reads it—and we may well get criticized for it—is that the boundaries of the Mediterranean seem quite flexible. So ... but, and as example of this, in a way, and it seems odd, but in a way, I think it's quite defendable. The Venerable Bede becomes a character in Mediterranean intellectual history because the Bede is ... Venerable Bede is widely considered the most learned man in, you know, the eighth-century world and ...

Will: [07:24]
And Bede, of course, is ... he's from Northumbria, so Northern England, around, as you say, the early eighth century ... so, late seventh, early eighth century. And he wrote a lot of things. He wrote a commentary on Revelation. He wrote various texts on how to calculate times of the year, and things like that. Yeah. He was a hugely influential figure.

Burman: [07:49]
Indeed. And, as such, there are various ways in which he fits within this Mediterranean world. One way being that he's using a very Mediterranean language, of Latin, to do this kind of writing. But he's also participating in what, in that book, we call—borrowing the term from a lot of other people— "a commentary culture," that is shared alike throughout the Mediterranean, the Western European world. You know, he wrote commentaries on a number of books of the Bible.

[08:27] So, and at the same time, a really important figure in our vision of the intellectual world of the Middle Ages is Ibn Sina, who grew up and spent most of his life considerably farther from the Mediterranean than even the Venerable Bede, way off in Bukhara in Central Asia. But Ibn Sina is becoming very clear now as the most influential single philosopher in the whole Mediterranean, one might say the whole western Eurasian world, because his particular reworking of Aristotle came to exercise enormous influence within the Islamic world, but also within the Jewish and Christian world as well. Ibn Sina was, of course, immensely influential on Thomas Aquinas. Some of the core insights of Aquinas really come from Ibn Sina, the core insights around which he builds a lot of his philosophical system.

[09:43] So, that's a very wide map of the Mediterranean, but we argue that it's a meaningful one, because both Bede and Ibn Sina are looking back to the Mediterranean and its culture and its pilgrimage sites and it's sacred geography, and all their work ... they're still this kind of intense engagement with the Mediterranean world. They both do their intellectual work facing the Mediterranean, even though they're a long way away from it, right?

Will: [10:17]
Right, yeah. And I suppose that, in turn, means that their own countries, their own local areas, are shaped by the Mediterranean, by their own learning. People like Bede being so influential in the way that England develops in certain ways, I suppose, then, the Mediterranean touches England in that unusual, particular way.

Burman: [10:38]
Precisely, yeah. I mean, one way that it does that is through the development of its language, which ... English is ... 60% of its vocabulary is French slash Latin in origin. So, even though its core may be in the Anglo-Saxon north of Europe, it took on a great deal of the Mediterranean ... with the absorption of ... and it's a sign of the absorption of this Mediterranean world that so many of the words we use are not from our pasty Anglo-Saxon ancestors, but from the balmy world of the Mediterranean.

Ben: [11:33]

How did … compared to your previous book projects, how did the idea for this one differentiate from the previous books? I know scope is one obvious way, but just starting a project with other people … was that intimidating? Was that exciting? What were some of the feelings and thoughts going into that?

Burman: [11:56]
Well, yeah, it's a good question. The origins of this textbook go way back. They go way back to … Mark Meyerson and I have known each other since graduate school. Not that many years after graduate school, when we'd see each other at conferences, we would talk about, "Shouldn't someone write…" Well, he had begun to teach a course that was essentially a medieval Mediterranean course here at Notre Dame, where he was a faculty member for four years before he went back to Toronto. And he would say, "Yeah, what we should do is get two or three people to do this." So, we would have that conversation every once in a while. And, you know, I remember at some point when the American Historical Association met in San Diego, and we were both there, I remember we had arranged to talk to an editor about possibly doing this. But what really catalyzed it was when Brian Catlos, whom we both knew well, started talking about it. And Brian Catlos is a really fine scholar, but he's also a real mover and shaker. He really knows how to get stuff done. And he took on the role of getting the logistics of this underway.

[13:15] I would say that … Well, first of all, the collaboration was really fun. It was really fun to do. But I didn't, for my part, step into it with too many worries, because I knew both of them very well, and we got on very well. And so, we met—I don't know how long ago, seven, eight years ago—in Toronto, after a short conference and we started to think, *Okay, for a textbook, you need 15 chapters. What would be in those chapters?* We started really from what we knew. We'd all had a very unusual experience, I think, for the time … that, we'd all gone to the same graduate school, the University of Toronto, the Center for Medieval Studies there. We'd all studied with—to some extent—J. N. Hilgarth, who was a great historian of medieval Spain and … but who was very conscious … he was very … he was always thinking about Spain in the context of the broader Mediterranean and the broader European world. And even though he didn't know Arabic himself, he was—way back in the 1980s—encouraging his students to learn Arabic, and that was a very innovative thing to do in a graduate program that was, in many ways, very traditional. It was a really innovative thing to do.

[15:01] And so, we all had that formation and had written about various aspects of the civilization that we were going to try to present in this book. So, we started with what we knew, really. And it was amazing to me … it was kind of remarkable to see how quickly we came up with, "Hey, here's what needs to go in the 15 chapters," which, that itself was a very collaborative sort of act. And then, our approach to collaboration was that, even though we are at three different universities, we each took on certain chapters as the ones we would be the first author of. But then, we met at least a half a dozen times over the course of six or seven years, for 2, 3, 4 days at a time, sometimes, and we actually read through each chapter out loud together, and we would talk it over and say, "Well, maybe you want to do it this way. And maybe…" One of the purposes of that was to try to give it a unified voice. And I think, for the most part, we accomplish that. We'll see what other people think.

[16:27] But it sort of grew organically in a way. And one of the … that organic part of it is kind of, I think, interesting to reflect upon, because we didn't really start with a discussion about "What is the Mediterranean?

And what are its boundaries? And what," you know, "is it legitimate as a frame of reference?" We had all ... you know, most of our graduate teachers and supervisors were sort of very pragmatic historians who were very keen on, you know, "What's a good research question?" And were not ... it's not that they weren't interested in historiography. They always wanted to see historiography from the ground up, rather than from the top down. And it's interesting that we never had that conversation, but by the time we got to the end of it, you know, I think there is a set of ideas about the Mediterranean as a frame of scholarly reference that we wound up all three agreeing on for the most part. And those came out. And an example of this for me was that, after I'd written ... after we were really getting done with the whole first draft of the book and working with the publisher on it, I had an opportunity to write an article for a festschrift for my predecessor, Olivia Remie Constable. And I was teaching at the same time a graduate course on the Mediterranean that Ben might have been in, I don't know.

Ben: [18:08]
I was.

Will: [18:09]
How was the course?

Ben: [18:10]
It was fantastic. It was a good group, actually. We had a lot of fun.

Burman: [18:13]
Yeah. And one of the books we read was Remie Constable's really fine book on the *funduq* and how that institution circulated around the Mediterranean world. Also, it hit me that there was a way of conceptualizing a medieval Mediterranean intellectual history as a meaningful field. That, in part, was inspired by re-reading Remie's book. And I realized, *okay, no, I really did*. Even though this textbook sort of grew organically, there was a set of ideas about what the Mediterranean meant that were always in my mind. And that essay I wrote was my sort of ex post facto historiographical reflection on what those were.

[19:05] So, I don't know what the lesson of that is. The people who are very interested in theory will always say that if you don't know what your theory is, your theory will get you in the end, and you'll wind up being betrayed by it. But I think, especially to take on a project of such scale, you have to step into it at some point and stop thinking about, "Is this feasible? Is it defensible? Is it..." You need to step into it and start working on it, and then you come to an understanding of the full scope.

Ben: [19:43]
I've had that advice before with papers of, like, you know what you're saying. The introduction will come last. Just start answering the question or the prompt, and then it'll all tie together somehow. And that's a very exciting tie together for such a much larger project.

[20:04] Another thing I noticed reading through the book was the collection that you all gathered of images and maps, that are very instructive, very ... you know ... pairing along ... and then a little, like, aside "studying objects." But I was really just impacted by just how many good maps you have in this textbook. I was wondering, like, how did that ... was there outside help? Like, I wouldn't even know ... like, how do you find these maps? Did you have anybody make a map for a specific purpose?

Burman: [20:43]
Yeah, so that ... most of the credit for that goes to my two colleagues, because the parts I wrote are most of that intellectual and cultural history and don't have that many maps. But my colleagues who were writing the sort of political, social, economic ... yeah, needed a lot of maps.

[21:00] And yeah, so we did have outside help, in the sense that for a textbook like this, the press does much more of the ancillary work than would be the case for a simple monograph. So, we didn't ... for example, we didn't have to ... we had to identify all the images in the textbook, but we didn't have to seek out the permissions or pay for them or anything like that. They hired somebody to do that for us, which is a relief, because finding him and then having to do all of that would have killed us.

Will: [21:37]
Were there times where you wanted to have certain images and then they came back and said, "Sorry, we can't..."

Burman: [21:42]
Yeah. Not all that many, but there were some. There was an image I wanted to use from the Vatican Library, and we could never get permission to have it used. We waited too long to get that on their radar screen, I think. But mostly they got them.

[21:58] And the same happened with maps. We would we had to come up with example ... sample maps, or draw them ourselves, using, you know, tools that are available. And then they hired a cartographer, who made a unified style for them and all of that. So that ... you know, if this had been a monograph, I would have had to ... we would have had to find somebody. You can usually find somebody who can do maps on a university campus. And we would have to find that, but we didn't have to do that. And they did come out well, I think. And you got ... you need a lot of maps to do the Mediterranean.

Ben: [22:44]
Yes, yes, lot of places. And then, again, the scope of time, how political and linguistic and religious patterns shift...

Will: **[**22:54]
Which, it adds so much to your understanding of the period. Yeah, as soon as you've just got a few good maps in there to give you some context, suddenly everything can really slot together in your mind much, much more easily. I've always found. Even when I'm dealing with someone is ... somewhere as relatively small as the United

Kingdom, it's just so helpful to say, *Okay, well, this is where these particular people were at this time* and just see how things shift. And it explains how languages are moving, how cultures are moving, political and religious kind of changes. So, yeah, I was really amazed and … envious that I'm not using a textbook like this.

Ben: [23:39]
Yeah, and getting to chat with a cartographer, what a fascinating world … life they must lead.

Then, another question I had about scope. So, there's this just shifting spatial scope of the Mediterranean and its influence beyond. Was there a big discussion about the temporal constraints on a book like this, because there's so much debate … a lot of times, "What is medieval period?" 500 to 1500 gets thrown out a lot. And then other people like, "No, medieval … maybe we're into the 400s, and maybe we're into the late 1500s. The period 650 to 1650 … I was really intrigued. And then, of course, like you're going to lap beyond … we have to go right from Islamic history … we have to go to the life of the prophet and the early caliphs slightly before that. But what was that kind of 1000 year truncation? How did that process go?

Burman: [24:37]
You know, that that was something we talked about from the very beginning, and I think it came about in part … part of it was, we didn't want to have to go into the huge detail of Late Antiquity, and the enormous detail of the … there's a lot to say about early Islam, and there's vast literature about it. And we felt like, *let's take Islam as a given*, because that's … we really wanted to explore the world of the Mediterranean—that is, the world of Christian, Muslims, and Jews living alongside each other. So, we wanted to take that as a given.

[25:18] And then, we had a strong sense … and I think especially Mark Myerson was influential here—who, in his own work, works later than the other two of us—that the big shifts in the Mediterranean don't come in the 15th century or the early 16th century. They come in the middle of the 17th century, when we've begun to see things like Dutch and English traders moving into the Mediterranean, and then, by that point, the enormous shift of resources from the New World to Western Europe, a lot of that going—even the resources that come through Spain—winding up in Northern Europe, for the most part.

[26:09] You know, I guess one image of that is the decline in importance of the arsenal in Venice, which, at one time, had been the largest … it's hard to know what to call it … the largest factory complex in the world, employing 14,000, 15,000 people at a time. And, you know, that's … at some point in the 15th century, when it reaches that climax. By the time you get into the middle of the 17th century, it's begun to decline toward what it is in the modern period, which is, it's a very interesting sight to see in Venice, but there's really very little that goes on in what was the arsenal. Whereas, at one point, it was the home base of the biggest Navy in … one of the biggest navies in the world. It ceases to be that gradually, and so, that's sort of this sign—one of many images, I think—that indicate that, yeah, the big shift is in the 17th century. It's not in 1500.

[27:21] So, then we decided to want to do that. And that suited me, because I had wound up—in my previous book, for example—though trained as a medievalist, working all the way up into the middle of the 16th century. And it allowed us to do things, to explore new things that were, for me, a really interesting … like, I never … I

had hardly ever studied the Ottoman Empire. And this meant getting to know at least enough about the Ottoman intellectual and cultural world to write about it. And man, the Ottoman period is just fascinating … just the 16th, 17th, early 18th century … just fascinating world.

Ben: [28:05]
I'm very jealous of some of those later periods, because there's just so many more sources. There's just so much … which is also, from another angle, intimidating, right? Because there's so much more to read. But it's also, like … sometimes you're staring into a black box, where like, *I know there were people there. What were they reading? What were they writing?* And then, yeah, in the early modern period, we have so many sources still.

Will: [28:30]
It makes me think of … I think it was in the supplementary *Texts from the Middle*. And I was reading the introduction, and I think you said that … you compared the Mediterranean, or the world you study, to sort of Northern Europe, where, in Northern Europe, generally, writing is restricted to the clergy, the elites, whereas in the Mediterranean you can be fortunate enough to have other kinds of people writing and leaving things … sources for us today. And I just read that and thought, *You're so lucky. I'm so, so jealous of this.*

Ben: [29:08]
Yeah. And there's nice … you know, I don't know. Your climate in the UK. It's not as conducive, I feel like, to keeping some documents for quite as long sometimes.

Will: [29:20]
Maybe not. Maybe not. Well, it's like … well, it's not the UK, but remember our conversation with Professor Irving, talking about the dangerous places that manuscripts can be kept, next to bakeries and things like that? It's kind of a miracle that anything survives at all, to be honest, with what the monks used to do.

Burman: [29:38]
Indeed, indeed.

Ben: [29:39]
Yeah. Speaking of *Texts from the Middle*, was having a companion, primary source book—because that's a practice that's often done with textbooks for history—was that an idea that was there at the beginning or was that a later … *this would also be a companion*?

Burman: [30:00]
If it wasn't there at the beginning, it was there relatively quickly, partly because we knew through contacts, and especially, you know … among the other things that Brian Catlos has done, is that he and Sharon Kinoshita, a literature professor at UC Santa Cruz, have set up the so-called "Mediterranean Seminar," which now is … they not only have three small conferences a year, but they have their own website, and they have a huge network of people interested in the medieval Mediterranean. And it's very clear from talking to people in that network and elsewhere that one of the big challenges people felt in retooling enough to teach the medieval Mediterranean

was having sources that they could use in class, partly because we have, for many parts of the Mediterranean, far fewer translated sources than we do for Western Europe. But partly because, if you're trained as a Latin Europeanist, how do you know which sources from the Islamic world or from the Byzantine world are suitable? So, it became clear to us fairly early on that we had to do that. And then the press, of course, wanted that done too, because they understand both that instructors really like this and that, then, they have to ... get to sell another volume alongside the first one. So, yeah, that was something we worked on from quite early on.

Ben: [31:47]
Of you three co-authors, are any of you this fall or spring getting to, like, use these textbooks with undergraduate students?

Burman: [31:57]
Well, Brian Catlos used it in page-proof form last semester to teach an undergraduate class, and he actually used it with his graduate students, as well, as one of the things they had they had to read there. We do know, because we got an email from an instructor at ... because it just came out on the 23rd of August, which was just, you know ... if you were going to adopt it, you had to feel like, *okay, that book is really going to come out*.

Ben: [32:30]
I've been waiting for this.

Burman: [32:32]
Yes. And so, we didn't expect many adoptions, but we got an email message a couple weeks ago from an instructor at Southern Adventist University, which is just outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, that she was using it and really liked it, and the students really liked it and even sent a send us a photo of the students with the textbook on their desks.
So, and I'm actually using two chapters of it in the freshman seminar that we were talking about earlier Ben. And then, next fall, I will be using it to teach a course. And we do know ... yeah, we know a lot of people who are adopting it in the spring, so we'll see where ... we're hoping that it will catch on and become a standard.

Will: [33:19]
Yeah, that's exciting. Were you able to run it by students ... test things out, then, as you were writing it?

Burman: [33:26]
Yeah, we did. We ... as long ago as before I came here, seven years or more ago—when we'd written just the first third, the first of the three parts of the textbook—we had graduate students in a course on the medieval Mediterranean read it and got feedback from them and some faculty who participated. And then, yeah, various people, various colleagues of ours at other universities have used it in draft form. One of my former students from Tennessee used it in draft form when he actually taught here in the Moreau prison program. And an old friend of mine from graduate school used it, I think maybe in the fall ... last fall in draft form. So, yeah, we were able to get some feedback that

Ben: [34:25]
That's exciting, yeah ... passing this around.

Another question I had as this, like, textbook is finding its home at universities: does this textbook replace maybe older Western Civ type textbooks, or does it necessitate a different course title? Because I've seen, like, a lot of times ... some slightly older and good Western Civ textbooks that cover the medieval period in their more recent editions, what's more common, I feel like, is, you'll have, like, *oh, by the way, here's three paragraphs about what's going on Byzantium. Here's two paragraphs tagged at the end about what's going on the Islamic world*, which is better than nothing. Like, good, but I feel like the scope of this book is different, that it's almost in like another course genre, perhaps.

Burman: [35:15]
Well, we wrote it, and the press ... we worked with one press at the beginning, and then they decided, after really liking it, they were going in a different direction, and they decided not to do it. And then we went with University of California. But both places were hopeful that the book would, on the one hand, yeah, become a textbook for a new kind of course, which it had already been, being taught by people ... medieval Mediterranean courses without any core textbook. But they also wanted us to think about the possibility of whether it could replace the standard medieval history course entirely.

And, you know, we tried to put in enough of the recognizable Western European, medieval Mediterranean material that people who are used to that could kind of think, *okay, I can do this*.

Ben: [36:14]
It's still here.

Burman: [36:15]
It's still here. We still have Charlemagne being crowned emperor, *and we* ... you know, *we have the Humanist Movement*, and various recognizable parts of that narrative, but now woven into a narrative about a larger area, and an area we think is both in need of scholarly reflection right now, but also very much in in need of being shown to our students, because it's a kind of Middle Ages, this middle ages of ... it's a multicultural, multi-religious mash-up in the Mediterranean, and it's much more like the modern world. And Mark Myerson, who teaches at Toronto, which is one of the most diverse universities in North America, always says that this is the Middle Ages that his students want to hear about.

[37:12] So, we do have ... I guess, our highest hopes were that it would also eventually replace the textbooks on medieval Europe. We'll see if that actually happens, and it may not. But that actually relates to a little broader issue as well. One of the things that was also in our minds when we began working on this is that there's a way in which an academic field doesn't exist until it has a textbook, or at least, that's part of what brings it into self-consciousness in an important way. And we, all three of us, thought *this needs to happen*, not only because students need to hear about it, but because as medieval Mediterranean studies go forward, they need to have

some kind of basic narrative to ground them, and a kind of book you can point to. And we hope it might accomplish that, as well as the shorter, more obvious goals.

Ben: [38:17]
Yeah. Which is ... yeah, those are two lofty and exciting things. And yeah, I mean, from a teaching perspective, those two texts together are huge tools in the hand of anyone wanting to teach a Mediterranean history course or learn about it by oneself.

Maybe ... this might be a slightly silly publishing question, but just the fact that ... because sometimes college textbooks, you know, famously, can be prohibitively expensive, the fact that this book was released in paperback form from the beginning and was a lower cost than a lot of other textbooks ... was that something that the publisher thought was a wise idea? Did you guys have any input?

Burman: [39:02]
Yeah, it's certainly what we wanted. But it's also what the textbook publishers want. In a way, they're taking ... They've invested a lot of money in this book. They are ... they're hoping that it will be adopted enough that they will be rewarded, overall, for doing it. And you see ... press really also was stressing that they wanted to move a lot of their publication about the Middle Ages into the Mediterranean area, and they wanted this to be an anchor for their program.

[39:35] But, yeah, we were very conscious, the press was very conscious, that one of the things about textbooks is professors are more and more conscious—a lot more conscious than when I was both an undergraduate or a young professor—about the costs of their textbooks. You know, because students have so many other ... cost of going to college has increased obscenely over the 30-35 years of my career. And so, professors are very conscious. We need to be able to assign an affordable textbook. So, it was something that was mutually agreed from the very beginning.

Will: [40:17]
Yeah, I think ... I can definitely see that this book—because it's accessibly written, and it's accessible as well ... you know, it's affordable for students—I think even those of us who don't study the Mediterranean, this kind of material is incredibly useful because it really can help us sort of rethink the place of what we consider to be kind of the center of the medieval world, you know, Western Europe. It suddenly becomes almost a fringe. But I think it's good to look at it in that way, because the Mediterranean is such a highway for the medieval world. You know, so much is happening there, and it all filters out to these more ... places out on the boundaries. So, I can see myself using this kind of material as well, even in a course in northwestern Europe, as a way to really get to grips with the medieval world proper and understand, you know, northwestern Europe's place in that and fight against those ideas that—or at least challenge those ideas that—these are all isolated places, which I think can still ... still a big part of it ...

Ben: [41:20]
Still persists. Especially in popular culture.

Will: [41:23]
Exactly, yeah. The medieval world is just lots of isolated kingdoms. This kind of material, I think, helps to challenge that assumption.

Ben: [41:32]
I'm also wondering, maybe this is a little too in the weeds, but there's that tension between a very isolationist, sometimes nationalistic view of history, a history of very tightly focused places, if they weren't interacting, trading, warring with their neighbors … and then also the desire and pull to look at global histories, which are exciting, but I feel very intimidated speaking confidently about things I'm actively studying right now, and so global history feels *incredibly* intimidating and overwhelming … to teach a course on that intelligently, speaking about different cultures … So, how do you see, maybe Mediterranean studies, this project of widening the scope from just studying Middle Eastern history, just studying, you know, Western Europe or Northwestern Europe, widening those scopes … how do you see that interplaying with a desire for global histories to be written or talked about or taught?

Burman: [42:31]
I'm very intrigued by the idea of global history and certainly, I think, at some point somebody will be in the position—probably a group of scholars will be in a position—to write, you know, the Eurasian Middle Ages. We didn't want to go that far. I don't … I actually don't think that the frameworks of scholars who are talking to each other and able to cross the boundaries well enough exist yet for that. There are people who are moving in that direction, like our former PhD student here, Romain Thurin, who does work across the whole range, from Greek Byzantium to China, and has the tools to do so.

Ben: [43:21]
His language skills are so impressive.

Burman: [43:26]
Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, there's movement in that direction. But we thought a manageable next step, the next step beyond just the traditional northwest European medieval textbook was one about the Mediterranean, precisely because there's been at least a generation—in some ways, more—of a lot of historic, historiographical reflection on it. There's been a generation of people who have been trained to think across these borders, so like our own, Alexander Beihammer, Professor of Byzantine History, who crosses all the linguistic boundaries in the vicinity of Greece, working easily with Arabic and Persian and Turkish as well as Greek. And there are others like him. And there's been enough of an interest among, for example, scholars of Islamic history and scholars of Medieval European history to talk to each other over the last generation or two, that a lot of the groundwork, we might say, had been done to write this textbook.

[44:40] I don't think yet enough of the groundwork has been done for that global or Eurasian vision. And I may be wrong about that, but that's my view of it. And, like I said, I'm very interested in it partly because, at my previous university—the University of Tennessee, where I taught for 25 years—I taught the first half of the

world history survey for a number of years. And that amounts to being, you know, a broad history of Eurasia with some isolated stuff. You know, a lecture here on Central and South America, a little bit here on some other places but, but mostly what we know of the world before 1500 and can write about is Eurasia. And I really enjoyed thinking about that whole Eurasian sweep of history. And I think, at some point, you know, it might be possible to do what we've done for global history. I hope that's a couple of ... a generation or two later, so that our textbook has a while to ... but we'll see. Maybe somebody will do it quicker.

Will: [45:55]
This might be getting into the unknown too far, but I'm curious because you say, "history of medieval Eurasia," but I'm curious about how you think the Americas and Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa, and even Oceania fit into the medieval world.

Burman: [46:13]
Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, as a matter of fact, when I was an undergraduate, and I had already discovered how much I liked the Middle Ages, and I was ... I'd taken a course in the history of the Middle Ages, and then I had ... I was working on an independent study with a medieval historian at my college, and he used to joke with me, because he knew I was from the empty spaces of Wyoming. He would say, "You've been working on the medieval history of Wyoming?" And, you know, there's a lot of ways in which that can be done. You can actually talk about a medieval North and South America. It's mostly a world that we know through archeology and ethnography, and, you know, some written texts from Central America. And I myself don't know quite how to integrate that into a global Middle Ages yet. I think there might come a time when that's possible as well. We have a ... I'm sorry, I can't remember her name ... but we have a faculty member here in anthropology who teaches a course called "The World in 1200," in which she's looking at various places all around the world in the year 1200. And that's, you know, that's kind of a beginning step towards doing that.

Ben: [47:44]
Yeah, and I think, as you said, as you mentioned, like, such a book would have to be written by a team of people. I was talking to one of our postdoctoral students who works in archeology, and he was talking about how, for his field, methods that he used in Central America are very transferable and similar to methods used in Greece, as sometimes structures are comparable, and types of material are comparable. And that is, like, so interesting and exciting and broadening of my, you know, small mind.

Unfortunately, that's all the time for today, Professor Berman. It's been a pleasure chatting with you. We'll include links to both of these books, *Sea in the Middle* and *Texts from the Middle*. Is there any other way online that you want people to find more about you or your work?

Burman: [48:36]
Well, they can find out more on my Amazon page. My other scholarly works are all listed there. If they want, I'm a semi-active Tweeter. They can find me @Bobqur: B, O, B, Q, U R. They can find me there. Those are the best two ways, I think.

Will: [49:02]
Amazing. Thank you again, Dr. Burman for coming and spending time talking to us today about your research and your recent book. And, yeah, we'll see you all again next time 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, @meetinginthema, and Instagram, @meetinginthemiddleages. For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening.