Is the Academic Medievalist Alone?

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The trend towards a “shrinking past”\textsuperscript{1} is undoubtedly a reality that those of us working in American and Canadian universities have known for many years now. Humanities disciplines, devoted more than others to the study of the past, have suffered inordinately from this situation. The result, one that we as medievalists know all too well, is that we end up being the sole departmental expert on the entire pre-1700 (mostly European) world. The reasons for this historiographical downsizing are complex: administrative proclamations of declining interest in the humanities in general are but one piece of the historical puzzle. There is no need to enter into this debate here, though; what matters is the result. Where there used to be two, three or more medievalists, there is now barely one: a single soul who is often asked to also teach outside the period on more “relevant” issues. So, one it is. But does that make this sole specialist a lonely researcher? And is this a novelty?

When presenting oneself as a “medievalist,” one automatically associates with all of the disciplinary specialists (literature,
history, philosophy, music, etc.) working with a unique goal, that being the study of the Middle Ages. This association-by-time-period has translated into the many university, regional, national, and international medievalist associations that have flourished in North America since the early 20th century. The situation can be very different elsewhere. The French, for example, still maintain strict disciplinary divisions among medievalists: the “Société des historiens médiévistes de l’enseignement supérieur public” (SHMESP) only brings together historians. There is no “Société française des médiévistes,” like there is a Medieval Academy of America. The point is that, in North America, academics working in a medieval field see discussion, participation, and collegiality outside their discipline (more or less, depending on the individuals) as a real and significant option. As such, a medievalist-historian might be alone in his or her Department of History, but can still have links, or even work collaboratively, with a medievalist from, say, the Department of English or the Department of Philosophy. Multi/pluri-disciplinarity in North American medieval studies has been encouraged for a long time, just like it has been in Classical studies. Taking advantage of this trend can help the medievalist to feel less lonely than some other colleagues in the same disciplinary Department who do not have such opportunities.

Moreover, because the Middle Ages span a one-thousand-year period (more or less), the medievalist is used to thinking across large time frames and in terms of both continuity and change. Exchanging ideas with colleagues who study other periods might therefore be easier than one might expect; doing so helps to mitigate what can be perceived as solitude in the field. The recent development of “medievalism” in academia — i.e., the use (and sometimes abuse) of medieval life, history, and culture from the early-modern period to today — provides a significant opportunity for medievalists to critically analyze the reception

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2 Hence, we see in grant agencies the existence of committees for “History,” “Philosophy,” or “Literature” in addition to those evaluating research in “Medieval studies” or “Classical studies.”
of their object of study in other/foreign contexts, and to reflect on their practices. The medievalist can thus engage in a fruitful dialogue with colleagues, either through teaching, research, or public interventions. Medievalists can be alone among their kind in an academic unit, but they can take part in more networks than many of their colleagues: the academic medievalist does not have to be lonely even when working alone.

The other aspect of the question concerns novelty. Academics in the humanities tend to work alone, at best with a team of students. The research model used in the natural sciences, with teams of numerous members, multi-authored publications, and large laboratories, is not the one developed over generations by researchers in the humanities or social sciences. A science based on physical experiences requires huge amounts of human and material resources compared to a science based on digging, reading, and thinking. Understandably, the former relies on groups of researchers while the latter relies on individual time. Needless to say, medieval studies falls into the second category, with medievalists looking for their material in libraries and archives, isolating themselves to think, read, and write. This century-old practice is still the prevalent one. No better or worse than others, it is (for now) the most appropriate way to research and reach sound results. Digital tools like electronic editions or digitized manuscripts, which require collaboration between disciplines and which medievalists have been prone to develop, are still less efficient in terms of the amount of time taken to produce knowledge than are the traditional methods of research in our field. So, yes, medievalists, like many of their colleagues in similar disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, tend to work alone because it is still the best method to answer their research questions.

This is not to say that academic medievalists are shy and reluctant to share their findings. On the contrary, professional associations with their annual congress, their web sites, their bulletins, their blogs, and even their bibliographical tools witness the extremely lively milieu in and through which medievalists contribute to and build networks around themselves. As just
one example, look at the Regesta Imperii bibliographic database: what other field or discipline has free access to such rich, multi-lingual international material? Colleagues in other, narrower fields envy this fantastic tool.

To conclude, medievalists might not exist in great numbers on particular campuses, and their methods of work make them work individually rather than in teams, but their object — the study of the Middle Ages — opens them to other disciplines and other periods. For years, medievalists have met regularly, travelled from one library to another, and exchanged ideas inside and outside their field. Academic medievalists may be alone, but they are certainly not lonely. Or at least they shouldn’t be.