

**History 303**  
**Possession and Property in Medieval and Early Modern Europe**  
King 339 Wednesday 2:30-4:20

Professor Ellen Wurtzel  
Office: Rice 307  
Office Hours: M. 2:30-4, F. 11-12:30 and by appt.

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Course description and goals

This seminar traces the development of notions of possession, property and ownership in Europe from c. 900 to 1600. In a period marked by both tremendous expansion and convulsive crisis in Europe, a very diffused notion of ownership gave way to an exclusive and formal one derived from Roman law and a scholastic natural rights tradition. This change did more than redefine a legal concept, it also connected people, shaped communities, and created boundaries in fundamentally new ways. We will investigate both the roots and implications of this shift and the spiritual, social, economic, and political work that these terms were called on to do.

While there are no prerequisites for the course, a general knowledge of medieval and early modern European history helps (textbook recommendations below). Over the course of the semester, you will complete readings, written exercises, and a response paper/presentation that are designed to familiarize you with both historiographical debates and the nature of available sources. You will also act as collaborators and sounding boards for others in the class, so informed participation in discussion is essential! Finally, you will conduct, in stages, a research project that analyzes a textual source from this period and engages with property and/or possession in some fashion. The individual components of the project (totaling 60% of your grade) are broken down below and will be discussed more fully in the first few weeks of class. There will also be one session with materials from the Allen Memorial Art Museum and a separate trip to the Cleveland Museum of Art, outside our regular meeting time.

Course materials:

All required books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and are on reserve in the library.

Required:

Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and demonic possession in the Middle Ages* (2003)

Martha Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (2010)

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1992)

John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (1698, various editions)

Barbara Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: the social meaning of Cluny's property, 909-1049* (1989)

Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640* (1995)

Selected articles and primary sources available on Blackboard

Recommended textbooks:

Lynn Hunt, et al., *The Making of the West*, 2nd concise edition, Volume I (2007)

Brian Tierney, *The Middle Ages* (1999)

Course Requirements and Grading:

All work must be turned in to receive credit for the course. The breakdown of grades is as follows:

Short exercises: 5% each (10% total)

Response paper and discussion: 10%

Class participation: 20%

Research components:

Research log/journal: 10%

Proposal, source presentation and historiography review: 5% each

Rough draft: 5% (ungraded, full credit for turning it in)

Final paper: 30%

Grading based on the following: A+ 100-97; A 96-93; A- 92-90; B+ 89-87; B 86-83; B- 82-80; C+ 79-77; C 76-73; C- 72-70; D 65-69, F below 65.

Details:

Short Exercises: Two exercises total. In one, you will familiarize yourself with the databases of secondary sources and reference tools used by medievalists in the initial stages of research. You will receive guidance on finding these sources beforehand. In the other, you will examine a group of primary sources and evaluate the kinds of problems property presents to these authors.

Response paper and discussion: the first week of class we will work out which class you want to choose. Your response, approximately 500 words (2 pages), should not be formal in form but should represent your coherent views on the reading and if possible, how they relate to previous work we have read. Please post your response in Blackboard by 4PM on Tuesday, the day before class, so that we all have a chance to read it ahead of time. We will have a short discussion during class time in which you will discuss your thoughts and answer questions.

Class participation: well-informed, respectful and, of course, brilliant! (ok, thoughtful will do)

Research journal/log: Also known as an archive log, this is a really useful way of thinking with your sources and keeping track of your insights and inspirations along the way. The entries will vary in length depending on where you are in the process. Even in the weeks for

which you are reading other work, you should still be moving forward in some way on your research agenda. You can upload them onto Blackboard every week. (I will not read them every week but will 'collect' them randomly. You will be graded on the consistency of the effort as well as the content of your log.

I will describe in more detail the rest of the research components in a separate document.

All written assignments should be typed and double-spaced, with at least ½ in. margins on all sides. All pages numbered! Your grade takes note of the brilliance of your ideas but also the clarity of your expression, the ironclad tightness of your grammar and the impeccability of your spelling. Proofread! Edit! When you have citations and you need to include footnotes and a bibliography, refer to some of the reference guides from the Oberlin History Department that I have posted on Blackboard. When in doubt, get in touch with me.

### Class Policies:

Attendance and participation: If you are able, please let me know before class begins that you will be absent. In a seminar that meets only once a week, 3 or more unexcused absences can result in a failing grade or being dropped from the course.

Disabilities: If you have specific physical, psychiatric, or learning disabilities and require accommodations, please let me know early in the semester so that your learning needs may be appropriately met. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to Jane Boomer in the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28.

Lateness: Late assignments will be penalized by dropping 3 points from your grade every day a paper is late.

Plagiarism: All work turned in for this course must be your own. The College requires that students sign an "Honor Code" for all assignments. This pledge states: "I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment." For further information, see the student Honor Code which you can access via Blackboard>Lookup/Directories>Honor Code. If you turn something in without pledging the honor code, I will wait to grade it until you do. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me or raise it in class.

**\*\*Finding and doing the assignments:** All required books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and are on reserve in the library. Readings posted on blackboard are labeled Bb. They are located under Course Documents in the file "Reading Assignments".

## **Class Schedule**

9/8 Introduction: Ownership in the western tradition.

Is property a natural right? An instinct? What kind of work does the notion of property do for different societies?

Jennifer Starkey, research librarian, will join us.

9/15 Property in the First Feudal Age

Barbara Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: the social meaning of Cluny's Property* (1989) introduction, chapters 1-4, conclusion.

How does Rosenwein define property? What are her sources? What is her thesis and what does she need to discuss in order to prove it? (Think about what you need to know to understand property in 10<sup>th</sup>- and 11<sup>th</sup>- century Europe (besides Latin)).

Due: Short Exercise 1. Bibliographic search. Also, in your research journal, please write about what kinds of ideas you are interested in exploring yourself.

9/22 Circulation of goods and things

Bb: Arjun Appadurai, *On the Social Life of Things*, introduction (3-63)

Martha Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism*, Introduction and chapter 3

What is so revolutionary about commodities? How do they change property in the later Middle Ages? How do they change social relations?

Continue to think about ideas in your research journal. Sign up to meet with me about research topics/sources this week or next.

9/29 Spirited Debates-Franciscans and ownership

Bb. St. Francis, *Testament* and selected texts from William of Ockham, Michael of Cesena and Pope John XXII <http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/wadc.html> and <http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/#Translations>

Due: Short Exercise 2. Choose several texts from these two websites, read them carefully, and write a 3-4 page paper briefly discussing the following questions. What are the parameters of this debate? How does each side argue its position and what constitutes proof of their correctness? How is property defined in all this—is it the link or the boundary between spiritual and secular power?

10/6 To Have and to Hold

Martha Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*, Chapter 2; skim Chapter 5

Bb. *The Good Wife's Guide* (the mesnaiger de Paris) trans. Gina Greco (2009) selections

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Clerk's Tale*

Why is marriage an important topic in discussing western notions of property? Do women and men describe property differently, or use it differently, in the Middle Ages? What is Howell's argument about the circulation of movable wealth and the appearance of the companionate marriage (or Love), and what kinds of sources substantiate her argument?

By this week you should have chosen your primary text for your research paper.

10/13 Demonic/Divine Possession

Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* (introduction, chapter 1, chapter 2 79-87, 98-113

(Margaret of Cortona), chapters 4 and 6). How did medieval people differentiate between demonic and divine possession, and how did it change? In what ways did spiritual

possession define identity, according to Caciola? In what ways did bodily possession depend on notions of gender difference, and why do you think that was the case? How does Caciola deal with the question of sources for her account of mystical experiences? Can we make a connection between questions of possession and control of property that we have discussed previously?

10/20 Research Workshop

Due: research paper proposal. Make a copy for everyone in class.

Jennifer Starkey will discuss the joys note-taking with us.

10/27 Fall Break No Class

11/3 Colonialism and Conquest

Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession*

\*11/6 (Saturday). Trip to the CMA to see Relics and Reliquaries, leaving c. 11 am and returning by 3 pm (2 hours in the museum and 2 for travel).

11/10 Research Workshop

Due: Presentation of Sources and findings. If you want to hand out an excerpt of your source, please do.

11/17 Slavery and Natural rights

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*; Bb. Juan de Sepúlveda, *Democrates Alter*

11/24 Individual Ownership enshrined

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

C.B. Machpherson, *Possessive Individualism* (selections)

12/1 Session with AMAM/Research Workshop

Bb. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature* (selections); Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (selections).

Intellectual property. 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian poets.

Due: Presentation of Historiographic argument

12/8 Final Workshop

Due: at least 5-7 pp. of rough draft; complete rough draft turned in by Monday 12/13

12/21 (Tuesday) Final paper due by 5PM.