History 303
Possession and Property in Medieval and Early Modern Europe
Tuesday-Thursday 1:00-2:15 Rice 100B

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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 50% of your grade) are broken down below and will be discussed more fully in the first few weeks of class.

Course materials:
All required books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and are on reserve in the library.
Required:
Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (1978)
Barbara Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: the social meaning of Cluny’s property, 909-1049* (1989)

Recommended textbooks:

**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”.

Course Requirements and Grading:

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

Short papers: 1. 5%, 2. 10% (15% total)
Response paper and discussion: 15%
Class participation: 20%
Final Research project: (50% total)
  - Proposal, source presentation and literature/historiographical review: 5% each (15% total)
  - 12 pp. of rough draft: 5% (ungraded, A for turning it in!)
  - Final paper 15-20 pp.: 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 papers: Two total. In one, you will explore your own relationship to an object/possession and evaluate that relationship in light of the theoretical approaches we’ve discussed so far. In the other, you will examine a primary sources and evaluate what property means to the author and what it can tell us about the connection between the material and spiritual worlds in the High Middle Ages.

Response paper and discussion: The first week of class we will work out which class you want to choose. Your response, approximately 500-750 words (2-3 pages), 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 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 Paper:** This will be your original research on a topic of your choice that arises from the themes raised in this seminar and also reflects your own interests. I will describe in more detail the rest of the research components in separate documents, but you will be responsible for: 1. a short prospectus outlining your topic and questions you want to raise and identifying possible primary and secondary sources, 2. a source analysis, 3. an annotated bibliography or literature review, 4. a rough draft and 5. a final paper. We will be presenting ideas and working on some of these sections in small groups (this is how professors work too!)

All written assignments should be typed and double-spaced, with ½-1 inch 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.
Class Schedule

Section I Thoughts and Theories

Week 1 What IS property? Possession and dispossession

2/7 Introduction

2/9 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?


Week 2 How do we assign meanings to objects?

2/14 The Life Cycles of Things
Does our modern western notion of property, or humans’ relations to objects, derive from the particular mode of production we use (capitalism)? Both readings concern the circulation of goods. Marx in particular is very dense; try to understand how he is defining private property, fetishism of the object, and why they derive from the way we work and exchange things.


2/16 Objects of Desire (and we’ll continue to talk about Marx and Appadurai)
Do you think collectors are a special breed of people, or is collecting symptomatic of a consumerist culture? How does desire figure into all of these readings?

Bb. Susan Sontag, The Volcano Lover (1992) (selections)

Due: 2-3 page writing about something you have owned or desired. Do these readings help you think about your connection to material objects?

Section II Between the Material and Spiritual Worlds

Week 3 The Living and the Dead
2/21 Relics What power do relics have? Why do you think they were such a tremendous part of medieval life? What does it mean that they are often fragmented/dismembered bodies, and in constant circulation?

In Class: Abbo of Fleury, Life of St. Edmund: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/870abbo-edmund.asp or another saint’s translation

2/23 Visit to the Allen Memorial Art Museum

I will hand out the primary source for your paper Suger’s De Administratione, and an entry on Suger of St. Denis from Strayer and Jordan, eds., The Medieval Dictionary.

Week 4 Property in the First Feudal Age

2/28 Monastic property
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 10th- and 11th-century Europe (besides Latin)).

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

Jake Purcell, who is working on a senior thesis on jurisdiction and female monasticism in the Merovingian period, will join us for this class.

3/1 Source/research discussion

Due: 3-5 page primary source analysis. We will discuss what you wrote about in your papers and also talk about the research process for the final assignment of the course.

Week 5 The Root of All Evil?

3/6 Franciscans and the problem of ownership
What is Little’s argument here? What is the connection between voluntary poverty and a commercial economy? Do people possess things differently in the 13th and 14th centuries than they did in the time Rosenwein described?

Lester Little, Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe ch 1-4, 9; pp. 3-69, 146-169.

3/8 The Poisoned Apple
Howell’s argument is a complex one. What does she do that builds on Little, and with what does she disagree? Overall, what is so revolutionary about commodities? How do they change property in the later Middle Ages? How do they change social relations?


**Week 6 Bodily Possession**

3/13 Demonic/Divine
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?

Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* (skim introduction, read chapter 1, chapter 2 pp. 79-87, 98-113 (Margaret of Cortona) only, chapter 3.
Bb. Angela of Foligno, *Memorial* (selections)

3/15 The Exorcist, medieval style
Caciola, *Discerning Spirits* chapter 5, chapter 6 309-319 only

**Week 7 Wrapping up and looking ahead**

3/20 Due: prospectus on final project-distribute to your group and discuss your goals

3/21-3/22 Individual meetings with me about your projects

**Week 8-Spring Break!!**

No class 3/27, 3/29

**Section III. Ownership Defining the Social, Economic and Political**

**Week 9 Family (as) Possessions; Working with Sources**

4/3 Prospectus and Source work:
Bb. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources* (2001), selections
Visit with Jennifer Starkey, history department research librarian, particularly about finding secondary sources and organizing notetaking.

4/5 Marriage and Inheritance in the Renaissance
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? Note: both of these are about Italian families/marriages—be careful of generalizing to all of Europe in this period.


**Week 10 ‘Goods in Profusion’; Working with Sources II**

4/10 Renaissance objects, created and classified

4/11 **Due:** analysis of source/s; distribute to group both an excerpt of the primary source and your analysis of it. Include a set of questions/ideas of what you think you need to know to answer your questions about your sources

4/12 **Peer Review Session**

**Week 11 Sovereignty and Territory**

4/17 **Mapping Cities and States**

**Meet in Special Collections**

Begin Valerie Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom*, Introduction, chapters 1-4

4/19 **Serfs and Colonial Subjects**
What is the connection between the making of the Russian Empire and mapping? Why do you think cartography arose when it did, and what kind of work did it do (and continue to do today?)

Kivelson, chapters 5, 7 chapter 8 p. 209 only, and Conclusion

**Due:** Bibliography of books and articles for your topic

**Week 12 Owning (New) Intangibles**

4/24 **When do ideas become worth taking?**
The idea of copyright only emerges for the first time in late 17th-century England; at the same time a notion of authorship is also solidifying. Connection to capitalism?
Bb. Adrian Johns, *Piracy: the intellectual property wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (2009): chapters 1-2, 6; might reduce and add a primary source from EEBO.

4/26 Swashbuckling on the high seas
Piracy was a particularly early modern problem for Europeans. Were there just more of them, or were claims of possession by Europeans growing stronger? Is piracy tied to the rise of territorial sovereignty or is something else going on?


**Week 13 Slavery, Freedom and Ownership**

5/1 Enshrining natural rights to property
Locke is famous for theorizing a right to property that exists in a state of nature, prior to any social arrangements we might make. What do we do that legitimates our ownership of things? Why do you think this right (among others) lies at the heart of his imagined perfect polity? What constitutes slavery and freedom?

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1681), selections

5/3 Seraglios and servitude
Montesquieu addresses the question of slavery and freedom by comparing western social mores with those of the East. Does his fictionalized account bear out or complicate Locke’s natural rights?

Baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (1721), selections

**Week 14 Possession of Knowledge (i.e., your research paper)**

5/8 No Class

**Due:** 12 pages of your rough draft

5/10 Peer Review; Conclusion and Party!

**Final Paper due:** Thursday May 17th at 4PM. Hard copy to Rice 307.