

INTERVIEWS

Lily Sickman-Garner

Smith College

Below are several excerpts from interviews conducted for this journal over the past several months with medieval history and literature professors, researchers, and authors. I wanted to use these interviews as an opportunity to learn more about how different careers in medieval history can look, as well as why professionals in the field were drawn to medieval history, how they feel about the way the Middle Ages are commonly depicted in media, and what kind of advice they have for undergraduate students.

The professors, researchers, and authors featured are:

Kelly DeVries, a professor at Loyola University Maryland who specializes in medieval military history. Dr. DeVries has also written and contributed to several medieval history books and journals, and is frequently featured as an expert source on medieval history documentaries.

Matthew Gabriele, professor of medieval studies at Virginia Tech. Dr. Gabriele is also one of two co-authors of *The Bright Ages*, a history of the Middle Ages which was published in 2021 and is intended for non-academics as well as scholars.

Jamie Kreiner, professor of medieval studies at the University of Georgia. Dr. Kreiner is also the author of *Legions of Pigs* which explores the impact pigs had on culture and society in the early Middle Ages.

Arvind Thomas, a professor of English at University of California, Los Angeles who specializes in medieval literature. Dr. Thomas is also the author of *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages*, which examines medieval interactions between literature and the law through William Langland's poem *Piers Plowman*.

Kelcey Wilson-Lee, a medieval historian and the author of *Daughters of Chivalry* a 2020 book which debunks common assumptions about the role of princesses in the Middle Ages by detailing the lives of the five daughters of Edward I.

Lily Sickman-Garner: Why do you think it's important to study medieval history today?

Kelly DeVries: Well, I don't know that it's important, per se. It's funny, because I don't believe that history repeats itself, though I do believe stupidity repeats itself. And, in fact, all too frequently, people make the same mistakes. And I'd like to be the guy to prove that those who don't study history do repeat it, but unfortunately, there's far too many, and they won't listen to me or any other historians. So as much as we want to tell people what history explains, what it tells us, they're not bound to listen. So, more or less, it's just getting to learn about the past and learn about people who lived and what they did and find out interesting things. It's just knowledge of the past. And we should have knowledge of the past just because it is the past. It's our past. And it's full of evils and bad things and periodically brave men and women. I wrote a book on Joan of Arc, talking about how brave—maybe a bit mad, but certainly a brave person who was willing to give her life for what she believed in. If we could pass those stories along so somebody can remember them maybe at a time when they need them, that's the importance I think.

Matthew Gabriele: I think there's two parts of that. There's a general way that I would answer that, which relates to studying the past as a whole, and that could be true of any period. What the past does is it demonstrates possible worlds. What I mean by that is that you always remember, when you study the past honestly and with clear eyes, that people could have made decisions other than those they did, that we were not destined to have arrived at this moment that we're in. So you see kind of a field of possibilities that I think opens up not only horizons in the past, but horizons in the present and the future as well. But I think medieval history is especially important even for an American audience, even here in southwestern Virginia or in Massachusetts, in that so much of modern politics, culture, religion is dependent upon medieval traditions. And I don't mean that in a sense that you can draw a straight line between then and now. I mean, you can, but there are a lot of detours along the way that you need to account for. What I mean by that is that it's such a source. It's such a reservoir of justification for why we do things the way we do, and in order to understand those justifications and the modern political, cultural, religious ideas behind them, you have to understand exactly what they're referencing.

Arvind Thomas: One reason why medieval history is relevant is, not because we are similar to those living in the past, but because of the differences. I'm someone who's committed to recognizing and, not necessarily celebrating, but certainly recognizing and understanding differences that separate us from various others. And I do think medieval history and medieval literature offer us examples of radical differences, differences that we occasionally, perhaps more often than not, at the university, reduce to sameness. We think, 'Oh, well, we understand marriage.' And we try to see marriage from our own perspectives, and in the process fail to appreciate what distinguishes a particular time or a particular understanding of marriage that was dominant in a particular place. And I think that attention to

particularity of place, time, and institutions is something that can help us reflect critically upon our own present. So I think it's important to recognize the differences in order to see how things we take for granted were not taken for granted before and what we see as normal today might not be normal when seen from, you know, from the perspective of somebody living in the Middle Ages.

Lily Sickman-Garner: What do you love about your work?

Kelly DeVries: Well, first of all, I just love knowing the stories. I love the original sources. I love being able to read original sources in the original languages or even in translation. Especially in my dissertation and then ever since, [I've studied] the military conflicts. What are both sides saying about what happened? What are the people who are observing from outside saying? And ultimately it's thrilling for me to be able to interpret things like that, although I do think I just love the stories.

Matthew Gabriele: I love working through a problem with my students. Sometimes, and many times, in fact, [I'll bring] them a problem that I haven't really figured out yet and [ask] for them to help me figure it out. And just the way that they can, when they're made a part of that process of learning, the way that they can respond and open up and really start to dig into things and just puzzle it out and talk it out is really an exceptional thing. And there's no substitute. And I'm not saying that happens every time—sometimes it just doesn't work. But when it does work, it's a thing of beauty.

Jamie Kreiner: I like that you can read whatever you want, and ask whatever kinds of questions you want. I like the independent nature of being a historian. I like that, in this field, the work gets better the longer you do it. History is so complicated, [and] I like that historians keep building on their work because they mature into the profession. I think that's really cool. I also really like teaching. I think it's so exciting to explore a society that is unlike the one we're in. You find these unexpected connections where they're weirdly similar to twenty-first century America, and in other cases [you] see how differently people thought about stuff or how different their experiences were.

Lily Sickman-Garner: Are there any misconceptions about medieval history or the work you do that you'd like to dispel?

Matthew Gabriele: Oh, yes. One of the reasons that my colleague David Perry and I wrote *The Bright Ages* was that we were struck by this persistent myth, and this is the big one I'll kind of focus on, this myth that the Dark Ages, the period between the fall of Rome and this thing that we call the Renaissance, was a period that that is ultimately unknowable. That's the metaphor of darkness. Is it dark because we can't know it, because there's no sources, because it's hard to understand. And so what *The Bright Ages* tries to do is to show a medieval Europe that is fundamentally knowable. There are sources, there are texts that we

can draw on, there's architecture, there's art, there's archeology, there's incredible interdisciplinary work that's being done in the fields of genetics or environmental history that allows us to say something about that past and to really understand how people lived and why it mattered that they lived the way they did in that particular period.

Arvind Thomas: The Middle Ages were pluralistic. There were certainly tensions, and there were wars, and there were all kinds of hatreds, but on the whole, medieval culture was multilingual, and Arabic in particular played a significant role in the 12th and 13th centuries. Medievalists don't learn Arabic, and I think it's important to learn if you really want to appreciate the multilingualism, the multi-cultural background to the high late Middle Ages in particular. People often say, 'Oh, no, Arabic has no place, it's Latin and a few other languages,' but they miss quite a bit of the whole picture, particularly if you're studying the Crusades, it's important to read Arabic and also read from perspectives other than those offered by the Latin writers.

Jamie Kreiner: I think when we're first confronted with people who are really different from us, we tend to think they're not as smart as us, and this is a particular problem when looking at medieval history. So just dispelling the notion that they weren't inventive or creative or as complicated and diverse as we are is sort of an ongoing, perpetual challenge, I think.

***Lily Sickman-Garner:* What do you hope people who read your book will take away from it?**

Matthew Gabriele (The Bright Ages): That's a great question. I've had this question before, and I still don't really know how to answer it because I don't want them to love the Middle Ages. For me—and this is absolutely just me, I'm not even speaking for David, my co author—I don't think you should love the past. I think you should look at the past with clear eyes. And what I mean by that is that the past is messy because people are messy. They do great things and they do terrible things. And it's important to tell that whole story, so you should never look back upon a historical period, especially one like the European Middle Ages, with affection or nostalgia. The one thing that I do hope that they come out with instead is that they have a sense of wonder about the period. I don't mean that in a naive way, but just a curiosity, maybe not wonder, but curiosity about the period. They were interesting people who lived in the past, they did really interesting things, and they did curious things. They made decisions which seem odd to us but made perfect sense at the time. And you, the reader, if you kind of follow along with us, we're going to try to help you understand why they made the decisions they did and what the consequences of those decisions were. Some of them [were] minor, but some of them [were] kind of world changing. And I think that's ultimately what I hope people will get out of it—that they'll find something about Matilda of Tuscany, or they'll find something about Hildegard of Bingen, or, you know, or Pope Innocent II, or something like that, and they'll just say 'I

want to know more,' and then they'll go find more because there is a lot of great, great scholarship out there.

Jamie Kreiner (Legions of Pigs): I hope they'll take away the fact that early medieval humans really had sophisticated ideas about ecology. They really saw themselves as part of a system that was fluctuating and interdependent and changed over time, and they had a lot of respect for the ways that other pieces of those systems could influence them. Sometimes that was a big pain for them, and other times they were willing to accommodate those inconveniences or restrictions because it meant that there was some kind of cooperative outcome or profit that they could get. In addition to that, I also want to demonstrate how animals are as much historical actors as people are, and can make a big difference in history, even if it seems insignificant to us now.

Kelcey Wilson-Lee (Daughters of Chivalry): I hope they'll take away from it that the medieval period is not a bridge too far, that it is something that they can learn about and find interesting and find commonality with. I told you at the beginning about that book by Anya Seton, *Katherine*. [It's] a fictional book, but, for me, it was a gateway to the medieval era. It's trying to be that for somebody else, somebody who might read fictional books or somebody who might read tudor histories or histories of the 18th century but would never have thought to look at the medieval period and try to say to them, 'This is something you can do as well.'

***Lily Sickman-Garner:* Do you have any advice for undergrad students who are interested in pursuing medieval history?**

Matthew Gabriele: I would say two things. One's a little bit practical and then one's a little bit more fuzzy. The practical thing is simply languages, learn languages. If you want to do any sort of advanced work in medieval studies, regardless of what discipline you want to do that in—literature, history, art history, kind of whatever—learning the original languages is absolutely critical. One of the reasons for that, although stuff is increasingly being translated, and that stuff is wonderful, and I use that stuff all the time, is that some of the translations are not great. And you always get a different perspective when you go to the sources themselves, when you're able to go and try to really puzzle out, 'Okay, what is this guy actually really saying and why is he saying that.' And you can't do that kind of without, again, consulting the sources themselves. The other kind of fuzzy advice is read as voraciously as you can, and don't just read medieval history. I would say some of the most interesting ways that my research has changed dramatically have been [from] reading outside of my field and forcing myself to think about kind of theoretical or methodological insights from research on the American Civil War or on theories of religion on modern Buddhism or something like that.

Arvind Thomas: If one is interested in medieval [history], one should be curious about the past. If you're looking to the past to find versions of yourself, I wouldn't advise you to go there. Because, then, probably, and this is just my own subjective opinion, you're not going to do justice to the past, you're not going to recover the otherness of the past. If you're curious, genuinely curious, and willing to be surprised, even shocked at what you're encountering in the past, and willing to look at things differently from your own perspective, then I think certainly it's worth turning to the medieval period. And then on a related note, you also want to engage hard questions or confront hard questions, and not be happy with answers that sound morally correct, or that appeal to your politics. I think it's important to set that aside and do one's best to understand how people different from you thought about the problem. And then, of course, you can always reach a conclusion and make a decision, but before that it's important to submit yourself to the past in a way that might make one uncomfortable, might make one even angry. I think that is essential.