

Medieval Eastern Europe



Time and Location

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays 11:45-12:35

004 Matherly Hall

Description

The medieval history of Eastern Europe is poorly represented in today's scholarly work published in English. Scholarly interest in Eastern Europe focuses especially on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the period of nationalism. The medieval history of the area is given comparatively less attention, which often amounts to slightly more than total neglect. For most students in medieval studies, Eastern Europe is marginal and East European topics simply *exotica*. One reason for this reticence to engage in serious research in that area may be the uneasiness to treat its medieval history as (Western) European history. When peoples of Eastern Europe come up in works on the medieval history of Europe, they are usually the marginalized, the victims, or the stubborn pagans. To many historians, they appear only as the object of the conquest and colonization that shaped medieval Europe and their role is restricted to that of victims of the "occidentation," the shift towards the ways and norms of Romano-Germanic civilization. The conceptual division of Europe leaves Slavs, Magyars, and Romanians out of the main "core" of European history, though not too far from its advancing frontiers of "progress" and "civilization." Who were those peoples? What made them so difficult to represent by the traditional means of Western historiography? What historical circumstances separate the Western from the Eastern half of the European continent? What social structures and political institutions were responsible for the specific developments in the medieval history of the area? How were ethnicities formed in that region and under what circumstances did the ethnic groups come into being? Above all, this course aims to answer some of these questions. Since it is impossible to get more than a taste of the subject in a semester, we will concentrate on major problems, such as the search for political, economic and religious stability/power, the interaction of secular and religious forces, the influence of the Byzantine, Carolingian, and Ottonian empires in Eastern Europe, the role of the region in the medieval history of the Continent.

Following a chronological order, we will look, each week, at the questions and problems raised by the study of this region, and at some of the primary sources from which historians draw their analysis.

Textbooks

- Florin Curta and Sébastien Rossignol. *Medieval East Central and Eastern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2025)[hereafter *Curta and Rossignol*]; ISBN 9781848756625
- Florin Curta. *Medieval Eastern Europe (500-1300). A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024)[hereafter *Curta*]; ISBN 9781487544874

Assignments and grading policies

There is no attendance policy, but you are responsible for attending all lectures and reading the required texts. Class participation may be taken into account to determine the overall grade. The basis for evaluation of performance will be a reading journal and five in-class assignments. Below is a detailed description of these assignments and the corresponding percentages of your final grade. Extra-credit work will be accepted only for students with active participation in class discussions. If necessary, I will explain the format of the extra-credit option during regular office hours. You are otherwise encouraged to keep in touch with me by e-mail, if you have any questions: I check my mailbox regularly, and promise to answer quickly.

Reading journal. A quick glimpse at the list of weekly topics (see below) will no doubt convince you that this is a course with serious readings. You will be expected to digest a substantial amount of information in a fairly short period of time. The best way to do this is to keep a journal. Before every class meeting, you will post an e-mail message on my address (on top of this syllabus), in which you will discuss briefly the readings for the coming meeting, ask questions and/or make comments, raise issues that need clarification, etc. All e-mails should arrive at least 12 hours before class meetings. Be sure to keep your postings to a reasonable length (175 to 250 words long). I do not want you to spend too much time on them, but I expect you to give an articulate presentation of your thoughts. Needless to say, I also expect you to check on correct grammar and spelling before clicking on "Send." Because the journal is designed to demonstrate your efforts towards an initial understanding of the readings, I must have *in time* one report for each class meeting, every week. The reading journal represents seventy percent of your final grade, 2.4% for each entry. I will send written feedback (via e-mail) on weekly entries midway through the term. Reading reports *cannot* be made up; you simply *need* to have a journal entry for every class meeting. Be aware that missed reports may result in a substantially lower grade.

In-class assignments. The remaining thirty percent of your final grade will be based on five short assignments in class. All five will consist of multiple-choice, map, matching, short-essay questions, or a combination thereof. Besides material covered in class lectures, the in-class assignments will focus primarily on problems raised in the readings. A careful study of these texts is necessary for a good performance at the test. Because in-class assignments are announced, I do not intend to grant any make-ups, except for emergencies (e.g., illness), in which case I may ask for official justification.

The following scale will be used in determining your final grade.

Points	Grade
97-100	A
93-96	A-
88-92	B+
81-87	B
75-80	B-
68-74	C+
61-67	C

55-60	C-
48-54	D+
41-47	D
35-40	D-
under 30	E

Weekly Topics

Week 1 (August 21-22): What is Eastern Europe?

- A question of terminology: Central, Eastern, Southeastern, and East Central Europe; see maps of [East Central](#), [Southeastern](#) and [Eastern Europe](#)

Week 2 (August 25-29): Sources and the Dark Ages

- Written and archaeological sources [*Curta* xix-xxiv]; see examples of [a 12th-century Rus' seal](#), a [birch-bark letter](#) from Novgorod, a [Bulgar inscription](#) on a column, and a [Runic inscription](#) found in Staraja Ladoga
- The last century of Roman power in the Balkans [*Curta and Rossignol* 9-14]; see a map of the [Roman Empire](#); see a view of [Philippi](#) (Greece) and a [plan](#) of Caričin Grad (Serbia, possibly Iustiniana Prima); see the plan of the [sixth-century Roman fort at Iatrus \(Krivina, Bulgaria\)](#) and an example of [copper coin](#) struck for emperor Justinian
- Slavs and Avars [*Curta and Rossignol* 15-23; *Curta* 3-8 and 293-296]; see the ideal [reconstruction](#) of a sunken-floored building with clay oven, a map of [Europe around 600](#) and read a [presentation](#) of an Avar warrior's burial

Week 3 (September 1-5): Early medieval Balkans

- Croats and Serbs [*Curta and Rossignol* 24-28; *Curta* 16-18]
- Bulgars and early medieval Bulgaria [*Curta and Rossignol* 54-60; *Curta* 14-16 and 83-84]; see a gold medallion of [Omurtag](#); visit [Pliska](#) and the site of the [Madara Horseman](#)

Week 4 (September 8-12): The West in the East, ca. 800-900

- Avars and Franks [*Curta and Rossignol* 42-46; *Curta* 8-11 and 21-22]
- **In-class assignment #1.** Carantania [*Curta* 25-27]
- Early medieval Moravia [*Curta and Rossignol* 47-53; *Curta* 23-24]; see a bird-view reconstruction of the ninth-century hillfort at [Pohansko](#)

Week 5 (September 15-19): "Steppe empires"

- The Khazars and their conversion to Judaism [*Curta and Rossignol* 35-41 and 93-96; *Curta* 35-40]; see a map of [Khazaria](#) and a brief presentation of [Sarke](#); [see a few examples of Khazar weapons \(including slightly curved sabers\)](#)
- Volga Bulgars, [*Curta and Rossignol* 60-65 and 97-100; *Curta* 40-41 and 45-54]; see [a map of Volga Bulgaria](#) and a brief presentation of [Bolgar](#)
- Pechenegs, Cumans, and Oghuz [*Curta and Rossignol* 66-70; *Curta* 48-54]

Week 6 (September 22-26): Conversion to Christianity

- The mission of Cyril and Methodius to Moravia [*Curta and Rossignol* 79-85; *Curta* 27-35 and 265-266]; see a [brief presentation](#) and a [facsimile](#) (sample copy) of the Freising Manuscripts; see also an introduction to the [Glagolitic script](#)
- Prince Boris and the conversion of Bulgaria [*Curta and Rossignol* 86-92; *Curta* 42-45 and 283-284]; see an icon of [St. Clement of Ohrid](#); visit [the church of St. Panteleimon \(St. Clement's monastery\)](#) and the [monastery of St. Naum](#) in Ohrid
- Bulgaria under kings Symeon and Peter [*Curta* 58-64]; see a [brief presentation](#) of the site and the [ramparts of Preslav](#) (see also the [plan](#) of the town); see a biography of [St. John of Rila](#) and visit the [Rila Monastery](#)

Week 7 (September 29-October 3): The “iron century”

- Emperor Samuel and his war with Basil II [*Curta* 64-67]; see a [map](#) of the military operations in the Balkans; visit the ruins of the [Church of St. Achilles](#) in Prespa (with a [plan](#) of the fortified power seat on the island) and [Samuel's Fortress](#) in Ohrid
- **In-class assignment #2.** Trade and trade centers in East Central Europe [*Curta and Rossignol* 194-203]
- Magyars [*Curta and Rossignol* 112-116; *Curta* 47-48, 105-107, and 186-189]; see a [map](#) of the presumed migration of the Magyars and a [map](#) of the Magyar and Viking raids

Week 8 (October 6-10): The rise of Rus'

- Vikings in Russia and the Normannist controversy [*Curta and Rossignol* 71-75; *Curta* 67-73]; see Scandinavian [tortoise brooches](#), Viking-age [swords](#), and a [hoard of dirhams](#); see a [shaded relief map of Russia](#).
- Conversion of Rus' [*Curta and Rossignol* 101-105]
- Kievan Rus' [*Curta* 266-269, 272-273, and 285-293]; visit the [St. Sophia Church](#) and the [Monastery of the Caves](#) in Kiev

Week 9 (October 13-17): Byzantium in the Balkans

- Byzantine Greece [*Curta and Rossignol* 128-132; *Curta* 77-78, 80-83, 84-86, 98-99, 148-153, and 190-192]
- Byzantine and post-Byzantine Dalmatia [*Curta and Rossignol* 121-127; *Curta* 89-91, 93-98, 100-101, and 273-277]; see a map of [Croatia](#)

Week 10 (October 20-24): New powers, I

- Early medieval Poland and the Piasts [*Curta and Rossignol* 106-111; *Curta* 110-113, 118-120, 123-126, and 214-218]; see brief presentations of [Ostrów Lednicki](#) and [Ostrów Tumski](#), Duke Mieszko I's [palace](#) in Poznań, and [Giecz](#); see a reconstruction of the tenth-century stronghold at [Grzybowo](#); see the [martyrdom of St. Adalbert](#) and the [transfer of his remains from Prussia to Gniezno](#) (twelfth-century panels on the bronze doors of the cathedral in Gniezno); see a [genealogy of the Piasts](#)
- The non-Christian neighbors of Poland [*Curta and Rossignol* 117-120 and 140-145; *Curta* 57-58 and 183-186]; see a reconstruction of [Truso](#)[Links to an external site.](#)
- Přemyslid Bohemia [*Curta and Rossignol* 261-270; *Curta* 107-110, 113-118, 126-129, 135-136, and 159-161]; see a map of the present-day [Czech Republic](#); visit the [St. Clement church in Levý Hradec](#), the chapel of Sts. Peter and Paul in [Budeč](#), the [basilica of St. George](#) in the [Prague Castle](#) (see also a [reconstruction](#) of the tenth-century castle), the initial [St. Vitus Cathedral \(Rotunda\) in Prague](#), the [Sázava monastery](#), and the [Znojmo Rotunda](#) (with a fresco in the [interior](#)); see the [statue](#) of St. Wenceslas in Prague and his medieval [portrait](#); see also a brief presentation of [Český Krumlov](#)

Week 11 (October 27-31): New powers, II

- Hungary after the conversion to Christianity [*Curta* 130-132, 195-198, and 269-271]; visit the [Spiš Castle \(Slovakia\)](#) and an outline of the history of the [Saxons in Transylvania](#)
- **In-class assignment #3.** The non-Christian inhabitants of Hungary [*Curta and Rossignol* 214-218 and 400-405; *Curta* 132-134 and 207-210]; visit the old [synagogue](#) in Sopron
- Medieval Serbia and the Nemanjids [*Curta and Rossignol* 284-293; *Curta* 218-223 and 307-311]; visit the [Žiža royal monastery](#)

Week 12 (November 3-7): Economy and society

- Agriculture, rural economy and cities [*Curta and Rossignol* 159-164, 182-193, 349-352, and 371-386; *Curta* 156-159, and 162-169]
- Social organization [*Curta and Rossignol* 171-181 and 358-365; *Curta* 143-145 and 153-156]
- Feudalism in Eastern Europe [*Curta and Rossignol* 366-370; *Curta* 136-139 and 169-170]

Week 13 (November 10-14): Catholicism and Orthodoxy: the rift in Eastern Europe

- Royal saints and monasticism in Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland [*Curta and Rossignol* 225-236 and 406-416; *Curta* 178-180]; see pictures of the abbey churches of [Sv. Krševan \(Zadar\)](#) and [Św. Jakub \(Sandomierz\)](#)
- Orthodoxy in Rus' [*Curta* 198-203 and 213-214]
- **In-class assignment #4.** Orthodoxy and religious dissent in the Balkans [*Curta and Rossignol* 219-224; *Curta* 176-178, 190-192, and 210-212]

Week 14 (November 17-21): Crusades in Eastern Europe

- Crusades and Eastern Europe [*Curta and Rossignol* 271-276; *Curta* 229-237, 240-244, 251-254, and 260-261]
- The Fourth Crusade [*Curta* 248-251]
- The Baltic crusades [*Curta and Rossignol* 277-283; *Curta* 238-240, 244-248, and 254-260]; see a [brief history](#) of the German Order of St. Mary (Teutonic Knights); see pictures of [Üxküll \(Ikškile\)](#), [Toruń](#), [Riga](#) and Marienburg ([outside](#) and [inside](#))

Week 15 (December 1-5): The Balkans and the Mongols

- **In-class assignment #5.** The Second Bulgarian Empire [*Curta* 303-307 and 311-319]; visit [Tărnovo](#), the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire (see, especially, the [plan](#) of the city and the [St. Demetrius Church](#))
- The Mongol invasion [*Curta and Rossignol* 294-300; *Curta* 325-342]; see a series of [maps of the Mongol Empire](#); see a [dirham](#) minted for the Golden Horde Khan Uzbek, and a brief presentation of [Golden Horde art](#)