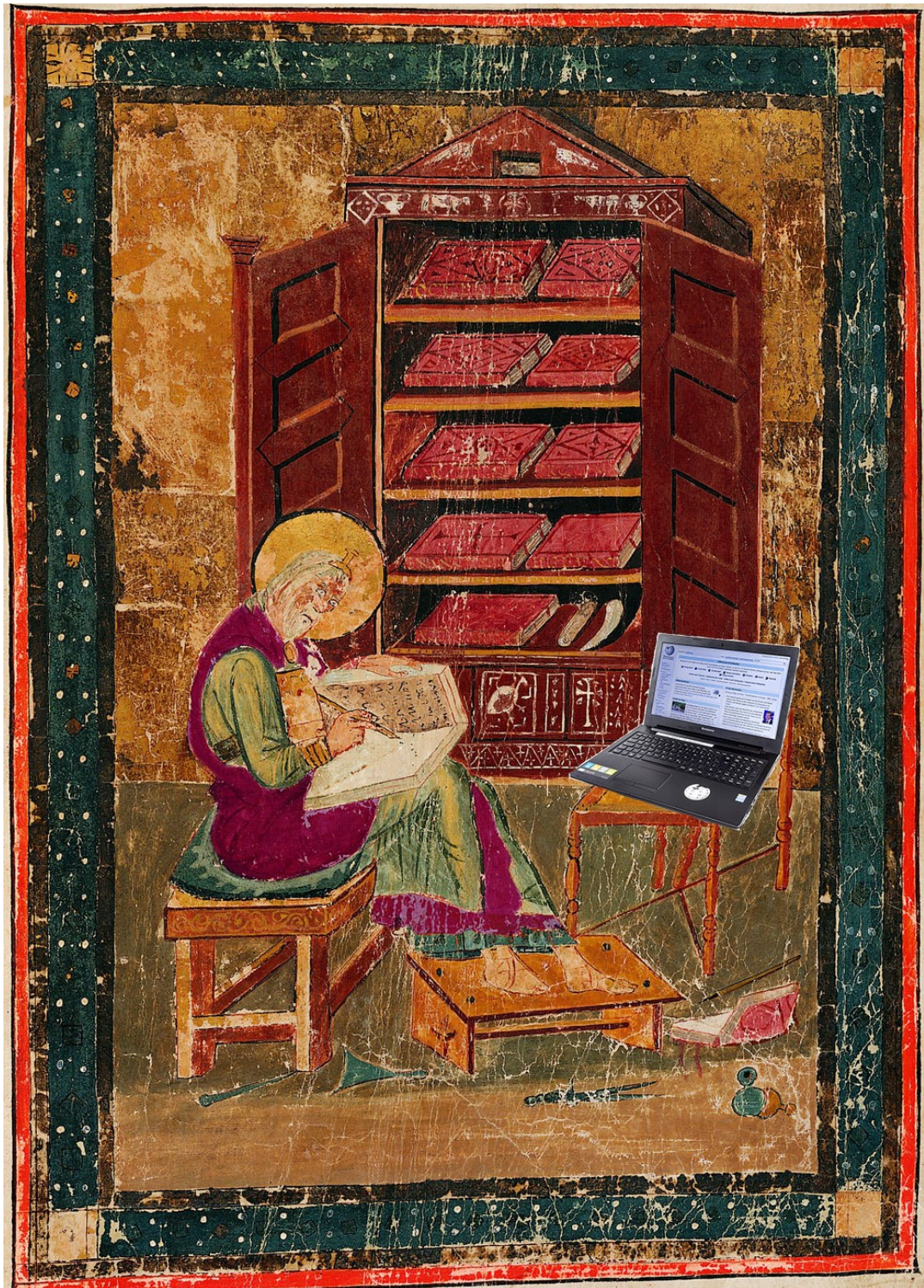


Wikipedia and Medieval History (HST 6089)
Dr Charles West, 2019/20



A 15-credit MA module taught at the University of Sheffield

Wikipedia is probably the world's chief source of historical knowledge. With nearly six million entries in English, and nearly 130,000 active editors (2019), its pages on history are read by many thousands of people every day. Yet professional historians tend to avoid engaging with it.

This course seeks to change that. As well as discussing critical perspectives on Wikipedia, you'll get practical experience in improving the encyclopaedia's coverage of the Middle Ages, allowing you to reflect on the kind of historical knowledge of the period it promotes and disseminates.

You don't need a background in medieval history for this course, but please note that you will be required to edit a page on a medieval topic.

Module Assessment

a) every student needs to edit or create a Wikipedia page relating to medieval history, broadly defined.

Exactly how you do this is up to you, and depends on the page and topic you choose. But as a rule of thumb, aim to add around 10 footnoted edits (some of which could refer to the same article/book), to help this public repository better communicate current specialist knowledge to the public.

This year I am encouraging (but not compelling) students to improve a page relating to non-western medieval history, whose coverage on Wikipedia is often less strong than for the European Middle Ages.

b) Every student then needs to write a 2500-word reflective essay, reflecting on their Wikipedia editing experience. **Please note it's the essay that is formally assessed, not the Wikipedia edits.**

You may not have written a reflective essay before. You may find some of the material on [this website](#) helpful. The Department has [reflective essay marking](#) criteria, which will be used for this assignment.

The content of your reflective essay will depend on your experience and interests, but might address the following points:

- how and why you decided which pages to edit/create
- why you made changes: i.e., how your changes made have improved the online encyclopaedia's presentation of the overall theme, not just in matters of detail but in commentary and prioritisation of material
- what challenges/support you met (e.g. obstruction/support from other Wikipedia editors)
- reflection on the differences between Wikipedia's presentation of historical knowledge (e.g. the NPOV) and the practice of historical research as undertaken in academic settings

The key to a strong reflective essay is to blend your personal editing experience with some of the 'theoretical' literature about Wikipedia to make a coherent argument.

Seminar 1: why edit Wikipedia?

In advance of the seminar, please open a Wikipedia account, creating a user name that does not reveal your identity. Then take the *Wikipedia Essentials* online course (it's short!): <https://outreachdashboard.wmflabs.org/training/editing-wikipedia/wikipedia-essentials>

Please also identify a good Wikipedia page on a medieval topic: what makes it good?

In addition, please read:

- Alaric Hall, 'How to change (medieval) History', *The Public Medievalist* (2019) <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/change-history/>
- Roy Rosenzweig, 'Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past', *Journal of American History* 1 (2006), 117-46, available online

Questions to consider in advance:

Do academic historians have a moral or social obligation to edit Wikipedia?

What does the history of Wikipedia tell us about the online encyclopaedia?

What are the differences between Wikipedia editing and 'normal' academic history writing?

Seminar 2: how to edit Wikipedia

In advance of this seminar, please take the online Wikipedia training video on *Editing Basics* (about 30 minutes): <https://outreachdashboard.wmflabs.org/training/editing-wikipedia/editing-basics>

In addition, please read:

- Richard Jensen, 'Military history on the electronic frontier: Wikipedia fights the War of 1812', *Journal of Military History* 76 (2012), 523-556
- Johanna van Dijck, 'Wikipedia and the neutrality principle', in her *Culture of Connectivity: A critical history of Social Media* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 132-152, available via STAR

Please bring access to a screen in class, since we'll be going through some basic Wikipedia editing

Questions to consider in advance:

How does Wikipedia resolve conflicting views about history?

Is Wikipedia a neutral space for disseminating knowledge?

Seminar 3: Wikipedia and the digital turn

In advance of this seminar, please decide which Wikipedia page you're going to edit, and work out what changes you're going to make. Comment on its talk page to explain your proposed changes; if you're making a page from scratch, please submit a draft for review via your sandbox.

In addition, please read:

- Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the digital: or how academic history writing lost the plot', *Cultural and Social History* 10 (2013), 9-23
- Pick a chapter from Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, eds., *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Chicago, 2013), available [online](#)

Questions to consider in advance:

Has the discipline of History acknowledged the digital turn?

In what ways is engagement with Wikipedia typical of the digital turn?

Seminar 4: The impact of Wikipedia

In advance of this seminar, please finish the preliminary edits to your chosen page.

Please also read:

- Matthew Steggle, 'Prospero and plagiarism: early modern studies and rise of Wikipedia', *Digital Studies* 2 (2010), [online](#)
- (skim rather than read cover to cover) Rudolf den Hartogh, *The Future of the Past: a case study of the representation of the Holocaust on Wikipedia, 2002-2014*, MA thesis, Rotterdam, [online](#)

Questions to consider in advance:

What impact has Wikipedia had on the representation and study of the past?

Seminar 5: Reflections on Wikipedia

In advance of this seminar, please evaluate the impact of your edits: how has the presentation of the topic changed? How many people have read your work? What kind of engagement (if any) have you had with other Wikipedia editors?

Please also read:

- David G. Halsted, 'Accuracy and quality in historical representation: Wikipedia, textbooks and the Investiture Controversy', *Digital Medievalist* 9 (2013)
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/dm.50>
- Murray Phillips, 'Wikipedia and History: a worthwhile partnership in the digital era?', *Rethinking History* 4 (2016), 1-21 ([online](#))

For more reading suggestions, have a look at

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Charleslincolnshire>