
Medieval Legends

Dates	Monday 9, 16, 23, 30 January and 6, 13 February 2023
Times	18.00-20.00
Location	Harry M Weinrebe Learning Centre
Level	All levels; please note this course requires some advance reading
Class size	Maximum 16 participants

Course description

Stories about chivalrous heroes, magical beasts and mythical worlds have captivated readers and audiences throughout the Middle Ages and continue to do so today. From the knights and warriors of the early romance cycles to the journeys into the unknown of epic poetry, the medieval world has a wealth of legendary narratives to explore.

This course will start with medieval receptions of the ancient world with legends of Alexander the Great and end with the fourteenth-century French tale of *Mélusine*, a magical serpent-woman. It will showcase myths and stories from the Middle Ages spanning different centuries and medieval cultures and continents, including Greek, Italian, Japanese, French and Persian material in translation.

As part of this course, you will receive a special guided tour of our exhibition *Alexander the Great: The Making of a Myth* which will feature examples of medieval adaptations of the Alexander legends in manuscripts and how medieval storytellers weaved fantasy, intrigue and wonder into their tales.

Week One – Medieval Legends of Alexander the Great

In the first session, we will explore legendary accounts of Alexander the Great by reading the *Greek Alexander Romance* and consider how the mythical elements developed during the Middle Ages. You will receive a guided tour of the exhibition *Alexander the Great: The Making of a Myth* followed by a discussion of the medieval manuscripts of the Alexander legends. Although an ancient ruler, Alexander the Great is among the most popular figures in medieval literature often depicted as a model for chivalry.

Week Two – The Divine Comedy

The Divine Comedy, a three-part poem written by Dante Alighieri, will be the focus of our second seminar. In this session, we will explore the fourteenth-century eschatological worlds of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven through the perspective of Dante's pilgrim, guided by his literary mentor and beloved muse, Virgil and Beatrice.

Week Three – Japanese Court Writings

The Pillow Book (Makura no Sōshi) is a series of diary entries, lists, essays and poems written by court lady Sei Shōnagon, in the Heian period in Japan. This book, completed in the year 1002, is considered one of the twin masterpieces of Heian literature (the other being *The Tale of Genji*). It gives us a fascinating peek into daily life within the Heian court. We will explore a selection of passages from the book and see what we can learn from them about Sei, her concerns and interests, and her perspective on life in the court.

Week Four – Arthurian Legends

Our fourth week will turn to short Arthurian romances, *The Knight of the Cart* by Chrétien de Troyes and *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, considering the elements of medieval Arthurian legends such as chivalry, trials, courtly love and, of course, the enigmatic figure of King Arthur of Camelot.

Week Five – Persian Tales

This session will be led by the British Library's Persian curator who will be discussing the myths and legends of the most important Persian literary works: Firdawsi's epic poem the *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings) and Nizami's *Khamsah* (Quintet). There will also be an exploration of the stories that relate to the Alexander exhibition with an opportunity to see the Persian manuscripts on display in the exhibition gallery.

Week Six – Dragons, Mermaids and Werewolves

In our final week, we will study medieval depictions of animal metamorphosis in two medieval French texts (in translation) beginning with the tale of *Mélusine* by Jean d'Arras, a fairy woman who transforms into a half-serpent, and *Bisclavret* by Marie de France which tells the story of a knight who shapeshifts into a werewolf. Topics of discussion will include medieval ideas about monstrosity and the human-animal boundary.

Tutors

This course is led by **Giulia Gilmore**. Giulia is a collaborative doctoral candidate at Durham University and the British Library. Her research focuses on the medieval legends of Alexander the Great with a particular interest in Old French and Anglo-Norman material. Giulia has worked with her supervisor on the British Library's major exhibition, *Alexander the Great: The Making of a Myth*.

Ursula Sims-Williams is Lead Curator of Persian at the British Library. She is co-curator of the exhibition *Alexander the Great: The Making of a Myth*. She researches and publishes on the material cultures of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia, Zoroastrianism, and Mughal India and has curated a number of exhibitions, most recently *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* at the Brunei Gallery SOAS (2013) and the National Museum, New Delhi (2016).

Hannah Kentridge is a Broadcast Coordinator for the Japanese Translation Unit at BBC World News. She taught herself Japanese as a teenager, and went on to do a BA and MPhil in Japanese Studies at the University of Oxford (Pembroke College), where her research focused on Japanese sociolinguistics, in particular on the variation in language used by LGBTQ+ Japanese people on Twitter and other social media sites. Hannah runs a Japanese language YouTube channel which has amassed nearly 14 million lifetime views, and she has made several appearances on Japanese television and in the Japanese press.

Required Reading

Week 1: *The Greek Alexander Romance* (Penguin Classics edition).

Week 2: 'Inferno' in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Oxford World's Classics edition).

Week 3: A selection of extracts from *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon (Penguin Classics edition): [1] In Spring, the dawn. [6] The emperor's cat. [25] Infuriating things. [38] Birds. [47 – 52] Horses – Ox Handlers. [216] Things that should be big. [217] Things that should be small.

Week 4: 'The Knight of the Cart' (short story) in *Arthurian Romances* by Chrétien de Troyes (Penguin Classics edition) and *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (Penguin Classics edition).

Week 5: 'The Reign of Sekandar' (chapter) in *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (Penguin Classics edition, trans. by Dick Davies) – this chapter can be found on pages 580-636 of this edition.

Week 6: *Mélusine: or, The Noble History of Lusignan* by Jean d'Arras (Pennsylvania State University Press edition, ed. and trans. by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox) and 'Bisclavret' (short story) in *The Lais of Marie de France* by Marie de France (Penguin Classics edition).

Previous skills, knowledge or experience

None required. A willingness to participate in group discussion, and to undertake the required reading for each session, will help you get the most from this course.

Facilities and refreshments

Please note that the Learning Centre will open to participants 15 minutes before the stated course start time. Tea and coffee will be provided at the start of each session.

Access

Please email adultlearning@bl.uk to discuss your access requirements.
