

**HISTORY OF THE MEDIEVAL WORLD
IN THE CURRICULA OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ**

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Abstract. *The study analyzes the content of the medieval studies curricula for courses taught at the Department of History at the University of Niš from its inception in 1998 to the present day. The research focuses on the history of the medieval world, primarily Western civilization. It investigates the geographical and thematic frameworks addressed by the analyzed curricula to track their development, provide insight into the knowledge students had the opportunity to acquire during their studies, and indicate the questions that were the focus of the courses. The research includes the curricula at all three levels of study, i.e., BA, MA, and PhD studies.*

Key words: *Medieval Studies, Curriculum analysis, Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš*

1. INTRODUCTION

Medieval studies encompass a vast chronological and geographical field. Although the term *Middle Ages* originated during the Renaissance, interest in this period grew significantly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Le Goff, 2015, 23–24). The commonly accepted timeframe (c.500–c.1500) largely stems from its use in educational history. Enlightenment thinkers sought to distinguish the *dark* medieval period from the Renaissance, though this division is debated. Historians like Jacques Le Goff introduced

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the concept of the *Long Middle Ages*, extending the period to the mid-17th century (Le Goff, 2015, 21–44, 79–112).

Medieval studies expanded in the twentieth century, adopting interdisciplinary approaches that explore minority groups, poverty, religious exchanges, history of everyday life, Eurocentrism and decolonisation (Classen, 2010, xxx; Quayson & Mukherjee, 2023; Bertarelli & Amaral, 2020). Despite its relevance, medieval history, misunderstood in its significance, sometimes faces marginalization in contemporary academia (Julien Demade, 2019). The continued presence of medieval themes in modern media underscores the importance of studying this era (Jones et al., 2019). The first chair in history, including medieval studies, was established in 1568 at the University of Freiburg. Other European universities followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Le Goff, 2015, 27–29). In Serbia, the Lyceum, founded in 1838, included medieval history in its curriculum. At the Grand School in Belgrade, medieval history became a distinct course (*General History (Middle Ages)*) by 1892 (Grbić, 2018, 63, 66, 95, 105).

The wave of advancements in higher education in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia also reached Niš. The University of Niš was founded in 1965, while the humanities were institutionalized with the establishment of the Faculty of Philosophy in 1971. The Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy was established on October 1, 1998, with classes commencing in the following academic year (Jovanović, 2006, 5, 15; *Departman Za Istoriju - Istorijat Departmana*).

Previous research on the history and curricula of medieval history instruction at the University of Niš has encompassed analyses related to Byzantine history (Šaranac Stamenkovic, 2018) and the history of medieval Serbia (Đekić, 2012), and considerations of the history of the Ottoman Empire, within a chronological framework that partially includes the Middle Ages (Miljković, 2012, 269). Therefore, these topics will mostly not be addressed in this research; instead, the focus will be primarily on programs concerning medieval global history and history of Europe. The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the development of the programs' curricula, to examine their chronological and geographical scope, and to offer potential guidelines for further development of medieval studies at the University of Niš.

2. BA DEGREE COURSES

The course titled *General History of the Middle Ages* has been a part of the curriculum since the establishment of the Department of History. As noted in the analysis of Byzantine history instruction, by introducing subjects related to the medieval world, the Faculty of Philosophy demonstrated an “understanding of the importance of the antique and medieval cultural-historical significance of Niš” (Šaranac Stamenkovic, 2018, 162). In order for the students to analyze the importance of Niš, which in the Middle Ages was strategically located on the Constantinople Road connecting Central and Western Europe with Southeastern Europe and Asia (Popović, 2017), it was essential to place it in the context of European cultural, political, and economic processes. The program used from the department's founding until 2006 stipulated that the course be taken in the fifth and sixth semesters. Four hours per semester were allocated for lectures, and two for tutorials (Studijska grupa za Istoriju, 2003)

The course initially covered the period “from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 to the discovery of America in 1492,” but primarily focused on medieval Europe. It emphasized barbarian political structures and the histories of countries like England, France, Germany, and Italy, with limited attention to the Middle East through the Crusades. Political history dominated the curriculum, and only one unit addressed feudal society, heretical movements, humanism, and the Renaissance (Studijska grupa za Istoriju, 2003, 1–5). Tutorials involved analyzing medieval sources (Studijska grupa za Istoriju, 2003, 5).

In accordance with Serbia’s accession to the Bologna Process in 2003, the course programs at the Department of History were adapted in 2006 to meet the new criteria. The reform also affected the course on *General History of the Middle Ages*, resulting in the creation of two one-semester courses: *General History of the Early Middle Ages*, taught in the third semester, and *General History of the Late Middle Ages* in the fourth semester. The first course covered the chronological range from “the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 to the beginning of the Crusades in 1096.” Political history of Europe remained the focus of the course, with attention to feudalism in several units. The course *General History of the Late Middle Ages* covered the period “from the beginning of the Crusades in 1096 to the discovery of America in 1492.” There seemed to be an intention to expand the geographical scope of the course, as it was planned to cover “the history of Europe and Asia,” although the units included Asia only in its Middle Eastern part. In the tutorials for both courses, medieval sources and historiography were studied (Departman za istoriju, 2006, 15).

In the next accreditation (2008), the chronological frameworks of these two courses were retained. The geographical scope of the course *General History of the Early Middle Ages* included the area “from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the North Sea to the shores of Africa.” The focus was expanded to “the political, social, and cultural currents of European history” (Departman za istoriju, 2008e). An identical geographical and thematic scope was provided for the course *General History of the Late Middle Ages* (Departman za istoriju, 2008d). A novelty in the program was the introduction of an elective course *Western European Town in the Middle Ages*. The aim of the course was to introduce the students to “the emergence, development, and institutions of communal governance. The course intended to provide an overview of the differences between ancient and medieval cities, as well as the development and decline of communes in Italy, Germany, France, and the Adriatic (Departman za istoriju, 2008f). In this way, a step was taken towards the study of the urban history as an important phenomenon of medieval civilization (Le Gof, 2010, 120–142).

Additionally, in the curriculum of the elective course *Philosophy of History*, which history students took in the seventh semester, one instructional unit dealt with Augustine’s theology of history (Departman za istoriju, 2008c). This, to a smaller extent, provided an opportunity to become acquainted with medieval philosophy, which was not directly part of the mandatory courses’ curricula.¹

In the program accredited in 2014, the course *General History of the Early Middle Ages*, previously in the third semester, was moved to the second semester (Departman za istoriju, 2014a). This allowed students to simultaneously follow the history of the Roman Empire, thus placing the fall of the empire and the Migration Period in the framework of the still strong Roman legacy. The curriculum of the course also underwent certain changes, with

¹ Further on the importance of including the philosophy courses in the curricula of non-philosophy studies, see (Dimić et al., 2022).

a separate instructional unit *The Rise of Islam*, and two units dedicated to the history of the medieval church. The chronological scope of the course remained the same, and the geographical focus included “Europe and the Mediterranean” (Departman za istoriju, 2014i).

The course *General History of the Late Middle Ages* was moved from the third to the fourth semester, and its curriculum underwent certain changes as well (Departman za istoriju, 2014a). The course began with the unit *The Age of Pilgrimages*, making a significant step towards understanding another crucial phenomenon of medieval culture (Cardini, 1994). The instructional unit *Renaissance Culture*, which was part of the previous curriculum, was omitted, but new units related to heretical movements, mendicant orders, universities and the Church were added. Thus, the number of units not strictly dealing with political history significantly increased – 6 out of 14 in the new curriculum, compared to 2 out of 15 in the old one (Departman za istoriju, 2014h; Departman za istoriju, 2008d).

The course *Western European City in the Middle Ages* was moved to the fifth semester, with no changes to the curriculum (Departman za istoriju, 2014a; Departman za istoriju, 2014j). New elective courses covering the medieval world were introduced – *History of Islamic Civilization* and *Philosophy of Religion*. The former significantly broadened the spectrum of knowledge that students received in the core courses, with a large portion of the program directly covering medieval Islam (9 out of 15 instructional units). The geographical scope was also broad, encompassing the area from Iberia to India (Departman za istoriju, 2014g). In the curriculum of the course *Philosophy of Religion*, there were two units that could provide students with insights into medieval and renaissance thought (Departman za istoriju, 2014e). The curriculum of the course *Philosophy of History* did not undergo significant changes (Departman za istoriju, 2014d).

The latest accreditation of the BA studies (2021), saw the course *General History of the Early Middle Ages* returned to the third semester and *General History of the Late Middle Ages* to the fourth semester (Departman za istoriju, 2021a). The content of both curricula did not undergo significant changes, so the geographical, thematic, and chronological scope of the courses remained the same. The elective courses *Western European City in the Middle Ages* and *History of Islamic Civilization* were not part of the new program (Departman za istoriju, 2021j; Departman za istoriju, 2021i).

A new elective course, which partly deals with early medieval history, was introduced under the title *Constantinople from Constantine to Justinian*. The course, as expected, is more strongly focused on the history of the Eastern Roman Empire but significantly contributes to understanding the broader significance of Constantinople (Departman za istoriju, 2021d). The newly introduced course *History of the Serbs in the Venetian Republic* partly covers the Late Middle Ages (Departman za istoriju, 2021h). The curricula of the courses *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Religion* did not undergo any changes in content (Departman za istoriju, 2021e; Departman za istoriju, 2021f).

3. MA DEGREE COURSES

With the alignment of the university program to the Bologna Process, a master’s degree program was introduced, which at the Department of History is designed to last one year. The program from 2008 had a rather simple structure, where students, in addition to the mandatory course *Methodology of Scientific Research*, chose one foreign or ancient language and one specialized course (Departman za istoriju, 2008a). In the field of medieval European history,

only one course was offered – *General History of the Middle Ages*. This course was designed to familiarize students with “the political, economic, and cultural currents of European history in the Middle Ages, with a particular emphasis on topics related to the master's thesis.” The program bore similarities to the undergraduate program, but certain instructional units provided deeper insight into the Middle Ages. Those were *Restoration of the Roman Empire: Myth and Reality*, *Decline of Feudalism and Crisis of the Feudal State*, *Search for an Exit from Social Crisis: Italian City-States and the North German Hanseatic League*. Additionally, more attention was devoted to church history (Departman za istoriju, 2008b).

The 2014 accreditation saw some changes to the MA program, introducing an independent research work as a compulsory course, as well as four specialized courses from a list of elective courses (Departman za istoriju, 2014b). Two elective courses pertained to the thematic scope of this research. The course *Eastern Mediterranean in the Middle Ages* offered a cross-section of themes from Byzantine history (7 out of 15 instructional units), as well as the history of Western presence in the Levant from the First Crusade (1095–1099) until the fall of the Crusader states and the subsequent Ottoman dominance in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Two instructional units were dedicated to the cultural history of the region (Departman za istoriju, 2014e). The course *The Balkans in the Late Middle Ages* partly placed the Balkan region in the broader context of international events from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. Five instructional units were dedicated to the relations of the Balkan states with Byzantium, Latin Empire, the Mongols and the Golden Horde, as well as the Ottoman Empire. The remaining 10 instructional units focused strictly on the history of individual states or phenomena, such as the Ottoman administrative system in Southeastern Europe (Departman za istoriju, 2014c).

With the reaccreditation in 2021, the MA Studies at the Department of History retained their previous structure, with the addition of two compulsory courses related to pedagogical practice (Departman za istoriju, 2021b). There were no changes in the list of courses concerning medieval history, and the courses *Eastern Mediterranean in the Middle Ages* and *The Balkans in the Late Middle Ages* remained available. Both courses retained their previous curricula (Departman za istoriju, 2021g; Departman za istoriju, 2021c).

4. PHD DEGREE COURSES

Simultaneously with the accreditation of the MA program, the Department of History initiated the process for the accreditation of PhD studies in 2008. However, accreditation was not achieved at that time (Šaranac Stamenkovic, 2018, 163). The PhD program was eventually accredited in 2012. Two courses were directly related to the history of the Western Europe. The course *Angevins in Hungary and Serbia* was offered in the first semester. It primarily focused on the Neapolitan and Hungarian branches of the House of Anjou and their relations with Serbia in the Middle Ages. The curriculum was focused on political history and the history of the nobility, with the exception of one instructional unit dedicated to Naples and the union of the Eastern and Western Churches in Lyon (1274) (Departman za istoriju, 2012a).

The second course related to the history of medieval Europe was *Venice and Serbia in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century*. It was offered in the second semester. This course combined knowledge of the history of the Serbian people with an understanding of Venetian foreign policy during the specified period. It was geographically centered on the

medieval Zeta region and the Serbian-Venetian disputes in that area. It also dealt with institutions, culture, the church, and economy in Venetian Albania. The curriculum described Venetian Albania as a “specific political entity through which Serbs and Albanians were introduced to the achievements of Western civilization, mentality, and governance” (Departman za istoriju, 2012c). However, the assertion about the significance of Venetian Albania for cultural and administrative ties between Serbs and Albanians with Western European civilization does not seem entirely accurate. The area it covered was already under cultural, ecclesiastical, and, in the case the Regnum Albaniae (1271–1368), political influence of Mediterranean states and culture prior to Venetian rule (Živković, 2010; Lala, 2008; Schmitt, 2001). The third course that partially covered the history of medieval Europe was *Philosophy of History 2*, offered in the fourth semester. Two instructional units were dedicated to medieval philosophy of history (Departman za istoriju, 2012b).

The PhD program accredited in 2018 brought certain changes. The previous courses were replaced with new elective courses. The course *Political Economy of the Late Roman Empire partially* covered the early medieval period. It focused on the economic history of both the Eastern and Western Roman Empire, as well as the economic systems of states that emerged on the foundations of the Western Roman Empire. A special focus of the course was on the Balkan region (Departman za istoriju, 2018c). The transition from paganism to Christianity during the late antique and early medieval period was analyzed through the course *Basic Characteristics of Social and Religious Life in the Period of the Late Roman Empire*. This course combined elements of Byzantine history and Western European civilization in the transitional period from antiquity to the Middle Ages (Departman za istoriju, 2018b).

The course *Serbs and Mediterranean Civilizations* dealt with Mediterranean states’ cultural and political influence on Serbia during the Middle Ages. Two instructional units analyzed Serbia’s position between the civilizations of the Christian West and the East from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. One unit was dedicated to the influence of Eastern Mediterranean culture on Serbia (Departman za istoriju, 2018d). The course *Philosophy of History* was retained in the new program, with only one unit dedicated to medieval philosophy, specifically Augustine's philosophy of history (Departman za istoriju, 2018a). It is noticeable that the new curricula dedicated a significant space to cultural, ecclesiastical, and economic history.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the establishment of the Department of History at the University of Niš, medieval studies curricula have undergone constant changes. The primary course through which students were introduced to the European Middle Ages was *General History of the Middle Ages*, or, following alignment with the Bologna Process, *General History of the Early Middle Ages* and *General History of the Late Middle Ages*. Although the curricula were changing through the years, they fundamentally retained European geographical and political-historic thematic scope. Inheriting programs and terminology determined in the first years of the university education in Serbia, the terminological designation *General History* for history that is not *national*, i.e., the history of the Serbian people, has remained to this day in curricula at the University of Niš. The term implies the study of world history, while the geographical scope of the curricula mainly encompassed Europe and West Asia. Therefore, it seems that the renaming of the courses could be considered in some of the future accreditations. This

was already done in the History Department program at the University of Belgrade in 2021. The four courses dedicated to *General History of the Middle Ages* were renamed into *Europe and the Mediterranean* with four different chronological markers (400–750, 750–1000, 1000–1300, 1300–1500) (Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2021). If a similar renaming would be considered at the University of Niš, it would more clearly align with the subject matters of the courses. Additionally, if the geographical scope of the medieval studies courses would aim at world history in the future, it seems beneficial to introduce the study of the global Middle Ages, which is a concept that seeks to explore connections between different world regions on a global level (Heng, 2021; Heng, 2022).

The tendency to expand the geographical and thematic scope of the curricula is particularly noticeable in the 2014 and 2021 MA studies programs, and the 2018 PhD studies program. Continuing this trend, but also expanding it to all levels of studies, the new programs could introduce courses that would cover in their curricula some of the current topics in the field of medieval studies, such as matters of body, frontiers and liminality, discourse analysis, emotions, etc., which have been so far less present in the curricula.² The history of medieval science and the environment could also be included in the future to foster interdisciplinarity among students (Cenić & Petrović, 2017, 47–50). Additionally, future curricula could consider incorporating activities conducive to blended learning.³ Given that digital humanities, particularly the digitization of archival materials, offer new opportunities for students to engage directly with historical sources, practical activities in this area could be introduced. A similar approach could be taken by familiarizing students with digital tools for museum learning (Pavlović, 2022). The idea of learning through video games is increasingly being considered in modern proposals for active learning methods (Jovanović, 2021; McCall, 2023). Given the medieval historical themes present in many video games (Traxel, 2008), along with their potential advantages for teaching history (Houghton, 2022), there appears to be room for introducing – or at least experimenting with – this approach in future courses in the Department of History at the University of Niš.

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² For some of these topics, see the entries in (Classen, 2010, 1419–1601).

³ Further on the importance of this approach, see (Lyubomirova Georgieva-Lazarova & Ivanov Lazarov, 2021).

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ISTORIJA SREDNJOVEKOVNOG SVETA U KURIKULUMIMA DEPARTMANA ZA ISTORIJU UNIVERZITETA U NIŠU

U radu se analiziraju sadržaji kurikuluma srednjovekovnih studija za predmete koji se izučavaju na Departmanu za istoriju Univerziteta u Nišu. Hronološki okvir istraživanja čini period od nastanka departmana 1998. godine do danas. Istraživanje je fokusirano na istoriju srednjovekovnog sveta, a pre svega zapadne civilizacije. Ispituju se geografski i tematski okviri sadržaja analiziranih kurikuluma kako bi se pratio njihov razvoj, pružio uvid u znanja koja su studenti imali priliku da steknu tokom studija, te ukazalo na pitanja kojima su se predmeti bavili. Analizom su obuhvaćeni kurikulumi predmeta na svim nivoima studija, odnosno na osnovnim, master i doktorskim studijama.

Ključne reči: Srednjovekovne studije, analiza kurikuluma, Departman za istoriju, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu