# Medievalism and the South: Reflections to Conclude a Thematic Issue and Continue Research

## 1. Historiography and medievalism: Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis

I start with a verse from a song by the Spanish band Jarabe de Palo titled *Depende* (1998): "De según cómo se mire todo depende" (in English, "Everything depends on the way you see it"). The text grasps a sense of our way of living in the modern world, in which the problem of the "point of view" is inescapable. That happens because we live a time when culture intersects and it is fundamental to express it in a relativist way, without being axiomatic: women and men change in space and time, interpretations change. Even historiography reflects upon itself and is in continuous change. The possibility of approaching human facts without affectioning to preconceptions and clichés but considering the various points of view, and continuing research without fear of correcting oneself, is at the centre of contemporary historiography, namely the one that addresses the central subject of this thematic issue, that is, medievalism.

The term "medievalism," once rare and poorly understood even among scholars, has in recent years gained considerable traction, moving well beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower. The term has the peculiar status of designating both the contained and the container: both the manners in which the Middle Ages have been represented in successive times and cultures, and the discipline that investigates "the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages." Medievalism as a discipline has its own history, which is now quite well understood. Born in the USA, Great Britain, Germany, France, and Italy almost simultaneously during the Seventies, has undergone an unrivalled acceleration during the last twenty years (MATTHEWS 2015: 5-8; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2018; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2020b; LONGO 2020). Nowadays, medievalism is studied in several countries, with a significant presence in Portugal, Spain, eastern Europe, and Brazil, and with projections also in the Far East. Specifically referring to Portugal, I remember how in 2013, visiting Lisbon for an Erasmus exchange, my lectures, which focused on medievalism, aroused interest due to the unusual outlook on medieval studies they suggested. A rich set of studies started to flourish immediately after: in 2015 the journal *Práticas da História* from the Universidade Nova de Lisboa was launched; in 2016 Pedro Martins discussed his doctoral thesis on *The Mid-*

*dle Ages in Modern Portugal* (MARTINS 2016); in the following year, in her handbook Maria de Lurdes Rosa affirmed that medievalism is a branch of medieval studies (ROSA 2017: 158 ff). The international conference "Using the Past: The Middle Ages in the Spotlight," held on Zoom in December 2020, established itself in an eminent position next to other great conferences on medievalism in those years, sharing an international and multidisciplinary approach and being able to boost an extensive debate. Finally, the present thematic issue, edited by Maria Amélia Campos and Pedro Martins, which is one of the outputs arising from that conference, represents at the same time an arrival point and the chance to energize this field of study even further. Along with the Portuguese, we can well say that the scholars of the entire Iberian Peninsula are aligned with the general trend, produce important results and open new research leads such as, to cite a recent example, the study of medievalist lettering in nineteenth and twentieth-century Catalonia (RAMAZZA 2022)[1].

But why is medievalism so multidisciplinary and directed toward the comparative study of cultures? Indeed, I think about medievalism as a form of relationship. This very concept is already intrinsic in the name, because of its ending, *-ism*. This suffix associates medievalism with classicism, but also, for instance, with feminism: *-ism* may denote an abstract term, but it also means a popular movement or tendency (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, in press). As noted, medievalism is basically "the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages." Therefore, it can pertain to anything, as long as the existence of a link with the Middle Ages is recognised. It can correspond to an actual passion for the Middle Ages, whether philologically reconstructed, or dreamed and re-enacted: the Middle Ages become an era full of images of castles and knights, ladies and dragons, magic, and a sense of wonder. Medievalism corresponds to the visceral relationship – positive or negative – that has tied western societies to the idea of Middle Ages since at least the end of the eighteenth century, with some older precursors.

Medievalism is so kaleidoscopic, that it is not wrong to consider it as a plural concept, i.e., as medievalisms. The only common denominator is the assumption that somewhere, the Medieval exists, that it can be a source of inspiration and it can be used. The underlying Medieval can truly exist – this is what David Marshall labels as *genealogical medievalism*, David Matthews as *found medievalism*, and Andrew Elliot as *overt medievalism* – or it can be

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[1]  Other bibliographical references to studies produced in this geographical setting can be found in issue's introduction and in the bibliography of the Spanish edition of my work *Medioevo militante* (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2015).

non-existent, and completely made up – this is what Matthews calls *made medievalism*, and Elliot *banal medievalism* (MARSHALL 2007: 3-5; MATTHEWS 2015; ELLIOTT 2018b)[2]. The same thing can also be said in another way: among some scholars writing in English, the distinction between "medievalism" and "neo-medievalism" has arisen. The former concept refers mainly to a placement of medievalism in the field of Medieval Studies, while the latter places it in the contemporary postmodern world, in which representations of the Middle Ages have no connection with medieval history. This macro-distinction is fundamental. Essentially, it implies that there are two different types of scholars dealing with the study of medievalism: those who approach it in lato sensu historical terms and those who approach it in actualizing anthropological and sociocultural terms.

The contents of these kaleidoscopic medievalism and neo-medievalism can be paratactically listed, without order or hierarchy, from epic to cartoons, from political history to videogames. But can we somehow find an order? The conference "Using the Past: The Middle Ages in the Spotlight" was organized by dividing the talks into sessions which corresponded both to macro areas of analysis and to keywords: "Myth and History," "Academia & Media," "Contemporary Politics," "Contemporary Society," "Collective Memory," "Academic Medievalism," "Literature," "Tourism," "Reception," "Recreation," "Portuguese Medievalism," "Heraldry," "Music," "Art".

The abundance of possible approaches to medievalism is striking if we compare the conference sessions and the issue's thematic subjects to the sessions of the vast conference "The Middle Ages in the Modern World," which was held in Rome in 2018 (the corresponding volume was published in 2020 by the École française de Rome), or to those of the earlier "MAMO" conferences, or even to some other conferences held in the last years[3]. Thus, we also discover the existence of, for instance, an environmental medievalism, or one connected to gender studies, or even one linked to the Jewish history. The *locus classicus* for these possible encyclopaedic classifications remains the small yet precious article, *Ten Ways to Dream of the Middle Ages* (also known

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[2] For a discussion see also MARSDEN 2018.

[3] The "MAMO" conferences were held in Saint Andrews in 2013, Lincoln in 2015, Manchester in 2017 and, as mentioned, Rome in 2018. The edition planned for London in 2020 has been postponed to an undetermined date due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and was then held from 24 to 26 June 2025. Other conferences on medievalism were held in Luxembourg ("Mittelalter zwischen Faszination und Fortschritt. Bestandsaufnahmen und Bedeutungssuche am Beispiel," Esch-sur-Alzette, Université du Luxembourg, 12-13 November 2018), virtually in Poitiers ("Les médiévistes face aux médiévalismes: rejet, accompagnement ou appropriation?," Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale, 29 March - 2 April 2021) and Rome ("Il medioevo e l'Italia fascista: al di là della 'romanità' – The Middle Ages and Fascist Italy: Beyond „Romanità", Istituto storico germanico, 9-11 June 2021).

as *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* and *Ten Little Middle Ages*), published in 1985 by Umberto Eco. This paper, later reprinted in various editions and in many languages, has become the world's most famous essay on medievalism (ECO 1985)[4]. The awareness of the vastness and versatility of medievalism has allowed the publication of the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Âge imaginaire*, in which more than 120 encyclopaedic entries are included (BESSON et al. 2022).

So, we approach medievalism from different, even widely divergent, points of view. These points of view should somehow be rendered more interconnected and homogeneous — but is this even possible? The problem is significant. An article by Richard Marsden focuses exactly on this question:

> The study of medievalism transcends existing disciplinary boundaries. It is an arena in which scholars of art, history, literature, music, religion, political science, and sociology have come together, all bringing to bear the methods and approaches associated with their own particular disciplines. Since the Nineties, the field has witnessed an explosion of new publications and approaches. However, in the main, the result has so far been a dispersed and eclectic series of case studies. This is because each contributor tends to bring his or her own subject expertise to bear on examples that happen to sit within their own disciplinary territory (MARSDEN 2018: 6).

How can we turn this problem into a resource? Medievalism – connecting, as it does, many different disciplines and social practices – requires an approach that is at once comparative and intertextual. That is to say: the different disciplinary points of view can enter into circulation, be shared, offer different interpretive keys, and make them available to others. Contemporary historiography can provide some hermeneutic tools to be used by historians or anyone who would like to deploy them In particular, they are the concepts of *histoire croisée– entangled history* (WERNER 2003 and 2006; GEARY and KLANICZAY 2013), *regimes of historicity* (HARTOG 2003), *palimpsest* (GENETTE 1982), *invented traditions* (HOBSBAWM and RANGER 1983)[5], *broadened historiography* (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2018), *refashioning* (OHNUKI-TIERNEY 2002), and *patchwork* (ECO 1985: 67-68)[6].

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[4]  For other "ways to dream of the Middle Ages" that have been meanwhile added see also CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2020a; on this topic see also FEDRIGA 2018 and ROVERSI MONACO 2023.

[5]  About the invention of traditions in Spain: MURADO 2013.

[6]  All these tools are widely presented in CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2024.

## 2. Alterity and political medievalism: the point of view from the South

The hermeneutic tool that takes us to the heart of our volume is that of *alterity*. The Middle Ages are something that we perceive as different from us in space and time: the past is a foreign country. Dialectic, controversy, distance, rejection, regret, nostalgia, exoticism, otherness, alterity: whatever we want to call it, this inequality between "us" and "them" is a fundamental interpretation of the idea of Middle Ages, that is, of medievalism. It is not a coincidence that medievalism closely resembles orientalism. The criterion at the basis of the famous concept of invention of the East by the West for its colonial purposes conceived by Edward W. Said is applicable – *mutatis mutandis* – to medievalism. John Ganim has already observed this in his book *Medievalism and Orientalism* (GANIM 2005). "It is only by interrogating European assumptions about time and historical progress that we can properly understand Western visualizations of non-Western cultures" (MARSDEN 2018: 5). Reflecting on alterity allows us to analyse the interactions between medieval motifs and postcolonialism (DAVIS and ALTSCHUL 2009).

The concepts of *alterity* and *orientalism* also allow us to talk about the South, since the South is also nothing more than a point of view – it does not exist or its own, but only in relation to other geographical and cultural positionings. Can one make politics with a compass? Absolutely. The cardinal points, East, South, West, North, are also political ideas. And is this political language permeated by medievalist representations? Also in this case, the reply is affirmative. Beyond representations of the East and West, also those of the North and South are well researched in the context of medievalism studies. Regarding the North, I remember a seminar cycle held in French and Belgian universities in 2015-2017 and a conference in Strasbourg in 2022, whose proceedings have recently been published[7]. The perspective of considering the North regarding the South in terms of relations and difference is already present in two essays of what is one of the most important Italian works on medievalism, *Il Medioevo al passato e al presente* (DOMENICHELLI 2004; BOLOGNA 2004). The present issue thus ranks in a field of studies in cheer development. It stands next to the volume *National Narratives and the Medieval Mediterranean*, whose introduction states: "Our volume sets out to examine some of the ways in which political vested, that is to say, national

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[7] The results of the Franco-Belgian seminar have been published in GAUTIER et al. 2021. On the same journal *Deshima* the proceedings of the conference held in Strasbourg were also published: DAGNINO and NISTRI 2023.

interests in the modern world have laid claim to the material traces of the Middle Ages in the Mediterranean sphere" (BOWES and TRONZO 2017: 1)[8]. It is also thematically close to the studies on Provence in its nineteenth and twentieth-century rebirth, which, as has been well noticed, are largely centred on North-South dialectics and on the specificity of the *langue d'oc* culture regarding the *langue d'oïl* (FACCHINI 2014; GRÉVIN 2021: paragraph 24). More recently, Italy has developed a field of studies on Sicilian medievalism, which also examines the close connections with Islamic and Aragonese cultures (LONGO 2017; MAGGIO 2020, 2021 and 2022; PALAZZOTTO 2020 and 2021).

It is well known that the belief that one's nation originated during the Middle Ages and that many of its fundamental features date back to that period is widespread, with different declinations, in virtually all European countries. It is an ideological construction that, based on history, had a formidable impact from the beginning of the 19th century to World War II. Still present in some parts of Europe and in certain political circles, it has been extensively investigated by studies on medievalism especially in the last 30 years (THIESSE 1999; GEARY 2017; GRÉVIN 2021). The belief that there have been ethnic-cultural continuities from the deep Middle Ages to the present day, and that these should necessarily come to be structured into state entities, is an offshoot of Romantic culture. Next to Great Britain, where the aesthetic taste for the Middle Ages is then being formed, the main place of origin of this nationalist medievalism are the German territories that had been part of the Holy Roman Empire until 1806. Germany is the land of choice for such a process. A few years later, the phenomenon spread to France and then throughout Europe. From then on, throughout the nineteenth century and until at least World War II, the substantive key to medieval history is, practically everywhere, nationalist. Through the Middle Ages, the origin of the nation (this actually brand new mode of relationship between a state and the people inhabiting its territory) is explained, and the Middle Ages are continually called upon to reinforce national sentiment in contemporary times.

Currently, historians are closely following the process of reusing the nineteenth-century cultural categories that created nationalism by instrumentally grounding it in the Middle Ages. That these theories are totally to be revised is the result of the historiography on medievalism of the past three decades. The fundamental interpretive axis of these studies, with a progressive orienta-

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[8]   This publication, with articles centred on Spain, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Sicily, Venice, and Cyprus, can be considered as complementary to our book.

tion, is to argue that the nation is (like gender) a cultural construction, which does not possess anything biological and deterministic, but rather changes through hybridizations and caesuras. The fundamental hermeneutical keys are those-which we have already mentioned-of "invented traditions," "imagined communities," and "histoire croisée".

Especially early medievalist historians (including P. Geary, S. Gasparri, G. Klaniczay, G. Sergi, I. Wood, W. Pohl and the so-called Vienna School) have worked on these concepts by referring them to the first centuries of the Middle Ages, questioning the nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography that grounded contemporary nationalism from conceptions such as those of the integrity and continuity of ethnicity over time and the right of the first comer or conqueror, and noting on the contrary the continuous and ever-changing construction of ethnic identities. Simply put, Tacitus' Germans, Alaric's Goths, and the Germans of the 20th century are not the same people.

The political function of this historiographical season has been relevant and even shareable, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, when there has been a return of harsh nationalism and interethnic conflict in Eastern Europe. However, it too is markedly ideological: while perfect continuity was postulated, now discontinuity would be understood as the only explanation of historical processes, thereby failing to reflect the figure of the complexity of history. Several scholars currently modulate this historiography by reasoning that there are not only traditions and invented traditions, but that intermediate forms must be considered, those that are identified in cultural refashioning, often unconscious. Continuities and discontinuities coexist.

Political medievalism of the 19th and 20th centuries declines in different ways from place to place, according to modes of expression that are, however, modular, so much so that it can be studied, today, in a comparative and cross--cultural way. Our issue analyses some modes through which political medievalism has expressed itself in five countries from Southern Europe: Portugal and Spain, together with Italy, Serbia, and Turkey. Somehow, we find inside a mirror game in which each mirror reflects one upon another creating a labyrinth, because we are talking about a concept, "imagined middle ages," in a geographical area whose consonance is in part fruit of that imagination, that of "the South." Since there are no doubts that the geographical position of territories practically remained the same during the historical-human time (obviously not during the geological one), the notion of belonging to a certain individual area of geographical culture is however mutable and may rapidly change. For example, the city of Rome, which in Antiquity was the "centre of the world," since the Middle Ages became part of the meridional periphery of

a septentrional region, which is Europe. In the same way, Portugal, which in medieval times lived North-South dialectics (which in this issue can be found, for the example, in the relationship between Christians and Muslims and in the analysis of the interpretations of the Gothic style by the nineteenth--century historian Alexandre Herculano), in the early modern period projected itself towards West, so that its "South" became something different from the Italian or Provençal "South". Thus, which are the elements of convergence in the representations of the Middle Ages in these countries? Are there substantial differences in the way scholars in these countries and those from other contexts in the West describe medievalism today?

There are two typical common elements in meridional medievalism (particularly the one described in this issue). The first must be, again, read in the context of *alterity*: in all the considered countries, an identitarian medieval period was constructed, identifying the fault lines which would be materialized during the Middle Ages: Latinity versus Germanicity in Italy, Christianity versus Islam (and vice versa) in Portugal, Spain, Serbia, and Turkey. The issue covers a chronological arch of two centuries, mostly examining nineteenth--century narratives in the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, twentieth-century ones in Turkey and contemporary ones in Serbia, where today we can see the recovery of nationalist medievalizing elements derived from Romanticism, so that, in a circular way, the reader returns to the nineteenth century. The values of alterity attributed to these historical contexts are solidly expressed under the sign of antagonism, but they do not miss significant theorizations of cultural convergence – as we can find in the assertion of a Byzantine heritage, although secularized and decontextualized, in Turkish culture after 1923, the year in which the Republic was founded. In this case, we can observe the idea of cultures that converge and blend; this is a concept that can be also found in the studies focused on other areas of the South – of which the main reference in the contents of this issue is Sicily (ARMANDO 2017)[9].

The rhetorical codes used in the Turkish Republic between the 1920s and 1940s – during which Byzantine archaeological sites were valued and Hagia Sofia became a museum – allow us to recognize the second common element of medievalisms in these different countries, namely the conscience of the weight of a common Roman heritage. All territories covered in this issue were part of the Roman Empire. The idea of Rome always returns, in various forms: as nostalgia and sense of decadence (a strong sentiment in Iberian and

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[9]   See also the edition of an essential source for the study of the Arab-Sicilian Middle Ages in the nineteenth century: FALLETTA 2018. Michele Amari was the author of *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (AMARI 1854-1872).

Italian culture) or as desire of return.

And what can be said regarding the thematic choices of this issue, in comparison with other experiences of medievalism studies? The examined sources are many and different, analysed through the lenses of some of the great disciplinary fields: literature, historiography, art, and architecture. The main historiographical sensibility which underlies every article is, however, always the same, being essentially focused on the acknowledgment of the political character of the medievalist phenomenon, particularly in connection with the construction of collective identities at the regional or national level. This, we can say with conviction, is typical of the studies produced in southern Europe. Therefore, there is not only a meridional medievalism, but also a privileged approach that primarily addresses politology and which clearly recognizes the fact that medievalisms are frequently born or affirm themselves to construct discourses for intervention in the public sphere. That is, the choice of a political analysis emerges in order to give a clear explanation to artistic, literary, and generally aesthetic motives, which are never regarded as ends in themselves but instead are considered instrumental in representing an ideology.

Such a predilection for the study of political medievalism, which also constituted the keystone of the conference "Using the Past: The Middle Ages in the Spotlight," is confirmed in the already cited volume *National Narratives and the Medieval Mediterranean* and in the book *Middle Ages without Borders*. The introduction to this work identifies the areas of major interest for medievalism as a political and identitarian phenomenon and distinguishes these areas from those in which – while political readings are also obviously present – the interest in medievalism as an artistic and cultural phenomenon prevails:

> Many of the French-language contributions [...] are largely historiographic in conception, while those in Italian tend to focus on the sphere of memory. Both, meanwhile, often show a marked interest in political uses of the medieval past. Compared to those continental patterns, the contributions in English, whether from the British Isles, America, Australia, or other parts of the world, are frequently more cultural-historical in character and attend to specific medieval survivals and afterglows. (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI et al. 2021: paragraph 6)[10].

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[10] A miscellaneous book balanced by the presence of many different modes of examining medievalism (including also the political one) is BILDHAUER and JONES 2017. Rome recently hosted the conference "Using the Past for the Present: Medieval Narratives in Modern Political and Religious Discourse" (John Cabot University, 28-29 March 2025).

The same politological approach is also observable in the scholars of Eastern Europe, where the problem of nationalism is still very present: beyond the interesting Serbian case, which is examined in an article of this issue, we should remember how the contemporary Russo-Ukrainian clash ideologically uses different readings of medieval history, which are modified and instrumentalized by both parts (SNYDER 2003; IVANIŠEVIĆ et al. 2003; BAK et al. 2009; BRUSA 2017; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2020b: 173-193; GRÉVIN 2021: paragraphs 3 and 9; SNYDER 2022).

To reaffirm the peculiarity of the choice of essentially questioning the political meanings of medievalism, I do not need to further emphasize the differences with other historiographies. Ultimately, all study of medievalism knows a beautiful circularity of themes and approaches, a circularity that is facilitated more and more. Among the elements of interpretative cohesion in the various historiographical schools, I identify the proximity and permeability between medievalism and the history of historiography[11]. A second common element between the various modes of studying medievalism is the notion, practically shared by all, that the phenomenon of medievalism always corresponds to forms of updating the past and, therefore, should always be studied as a contemporary social phenomenon. In short, the readings of medievalism made in the South, notwithstanding the predilection for politics and the different phenomenology of the case studies, use common methodological and hermeneutical instruments. This demonstrates once more that not only the subject but also the discipline which we call medievalism are pan-European and pan-western: one can really speak of "Middle Ages without borders."

## Conclusions to the conclusions

I had the honour to introduce the conference "Using the Past: The Middle Ages in the Spotlight" and now I have the honour to conclude this issue. Clearly, in December 2020 all of us would have preferred to speak from Batalha, where the battle of Aljubarrota fought in 1385 is commemorated, instead of having to stay at home in front of a screen; but even in that odd situation we found something charming. Indeed, we might say that during the conference we were living in a condition close to Fantasy. We were a gathering of women and men meeting and talking about medievalism by only showing our faces

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[11] On that subject see works like CANTOR 1993; AMALVI 1996; and CARPEGNA FALCONIERI and FACCHINI 2018.

through computers connected to the web. Through them we looked at each other, asked questions, searched for answers: in other words, we used the contemporary version of magic mirrors. This metaphor should not be alien to us: the mirror is, and has been, a symbol used specifically to describe the link between the Middle Ages and their representations, which is exactly what medievalism is[12]. The mirror, whether magical or simply a computer screen, places us in a situation of reciprocal communication. It connects us. The word that underlies my speech is precisely *connection*.

Indeed, by dealing with medievalism, we are changing the point of view, we are effecting what ancient Greeks used to call *metanoia*. Today, medievalism is crucial because it keeps calling into question the relations between medieval history and its contemporary receptions more than any other form of historical knowledge. It is medievalism, namely the observation and the criticism of the contemporary political manipulation of the Middle Ages, that has launched the wide debate on White supremacism, especially in the academic environment of the United States (ELLIOTT 2018; KIM 2019)[13]. This confrontation has led many of the hitherto oblivious participants in the "Festival of Champagne" of Kalamazoo (as Jacques Le Goff loved to say), to open their eyes to a historical reality – the use of the Middle Ages by the political Far Right – that Continental Europe has long recognized, and to face a problem which, precisely because it is historiographic, should be seen not as a scholarly but as political, not as confined to the past but as current. Themes that are very popular in medieval history, like gender roles, cannot ignore their medievalist inflection; ignoring that would mean locking up the conversation into the Ivory Tower when it is rather the people in the *piazza* below who want to be involved (JONES et al. 2020). The study of medievalism is, after all, a specific example of the pressing cultural demand that has claimed Public History in recent years (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2022). In short, we are concerned with an aggregating field of study. In a world that is exploding in so many ways, we are creating an open cultural *koinè*.

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[12] Just recall the first book released on this topic in Italy (BORDONE 1993), or FAZIOLI 2017.

[13] See also *Race, Racism and the Middle Ages*, special series of *The Public Medievalist*, 2017, online: https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-toc/ (cons. 4 June 2025)

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