

Meiji Jingū Autumn Seminar in Paris 2023

Samurai, Castles, and the Medievalization of Modern Japan

Oleg Benesch (University of York)

Friday, October 6th, 2023 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Room Léon Vandermeersch (481C, 4th floor, building C, 5 rue Thomas Mann, 75013, Paris)



Illustration : private collection, Oleg Benesch

In the nineteenth century, Europeans rediscovered and reinterpreted the Middle Ages on a grand scale. Medievalist symbols and ideals were widely invoked as a response to industrialization and the Enlightenment, feeding into art, architecture, literature, and culture, from the knightly tales of Sir Walter Scott to the proliferation of Gothic architecture. Medievalist ideals also had a powerful influence beyond Europe, as many colonial officials, soldiers, and settlers saw themselves as modern heirs of medieval knighthood, spreading Christianity and “civilization” as part of their perceived imperial mission. Medieval symbols and narratives were eagerly taken up in European settler societies, including the United States, Australia, and Latin America.

In this talk, I examine the development of medievalism in Japan, which confronted Western imperialism – and built its own empire – during what I call the “global medievalist moment” from the 1840s to the 1960s. This was an age of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism, and societies around the world looked to discover and mine their own medieval pasts for national symbols and legitimacy. In this context, I examine the reinvention of the samurai warriors and other symbols of medieval Japan, and the important role these play in Japan’s modern history. I further explore how Japanese medievalism came to be recognized and even celebrated in the West, especially after Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905, and how the confluence of Japanese and European medievalism influenced views of the Middle Ages in China.

Oleg Benesch is Professor of East Asian History at the University of York. He is the author of *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido in Modern Japan* (Oxford 2014), co-author of *Japan’s Castles: Citadels of Modernity in War and Peace* (Cambridge 2019), and co-editor of *Drugs and the Politics of Consumption in Japan* (Brill 2023).



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