CODEX Proposal

Mapping Identity across the
Ottoman Mediterranean World

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Description & Goals

In the Spring of 2021 I am planning on revising a course entitled "Piracy, Captivity, and Identity in the Ottoman Mediterranean" and offering it as a 200-level history seminar (18 students). This class focuses on the early modern (16th to 18th century) Mediterranean world as one historical landscape with a focus on the issues of identity, conversion, and slavery in the context of sea-based piracy, captivity, and migration. The major theme of this course is the fluidity of historical narratives and communal/individual identities as people moved across the region's religious, legal, and political boundaries.

One of the central assignments of the course is a primary source analysis. I ask students to locate a (usually written) source from the time period we are examining and then put that work into historical context, analyze it, and draw conclusions about what the source can tell us about the author, their audience(s), and the time period in which it was created.

For this Mediterranean course, there is a plethora of what are known as "captivity narratives" that were written by English seamen who were captured at sea and then wrote about their travails once they were ransomed and returned home. Written for audiences that were often both curious and repulsed by the Ottoman Empire, these texts often narrate dramatic stories of conversions (attempted, forced, or resisted to different degrees). Some sailors claimed to have never "turned Turk" despite horrific torture. Others described reluctant conversions. Others seemed quite happy to be temporarily adopted by their owners as surrogate family members. Interrogating these narrative forms and tropes, what they say about expectations around identity (religious, ethnic, and gender) will be a major part of the course.

It is around these captivity narratives that I would like to design a digital assignment. Despite the salacious titles that were often used to market this genre of writing, these sources can be quite tedious and detailed: they list locations, where and who the narrator was with, where they went next, who owned them, who they were sold to, and ultimately the means of their "redemption" back to England. Figuring out what to do with so much information can often be daunting to students – I find that students naturally gravitate to the most dramatic quotes or examples. However, for this project, I would like to delve into the subtleties of these narratives: How long did a particular narrator spend in each location? How often did they move or travel in the region? Did they only stay in North African port cities or did they travel to other major Ottoman cities (Mecca, Istanbul, etc.)? How did they talk about their conditions and identities as they moved across this landscape?

My goal is to have students work in small groups and use mapping tools (I'm considering ArcGIS Online, StoryMaps, or Google Earth) to trace the movement of these individuals over geographic space and time. In doing so, I have several objectives. First, I want them to really consider the physicality of these narratives: where these locations were, how travel was undertaken, the time it would have taken to get from one place to another, etc. If there are inconsistencies, I expect them to grapple with the veracity of these reports. If there are patterns, I want them to consider the importance of particular locations as nexuses for trade, migration, or slavery. Second, I want them overlay these physical movement with shifts in legal (slave, free, ransomed, etc.) and religious status (Christian, Muslim, etc.) and how these identities overlapped in various locales. What did it mean to be a converted-Muslim slave in Mecca or a ransomed Christian in Tripoli? From my own reading of these sources, these identities often remained ambiguous. Grappling with that ambiguity in light this genre of writing will provide an beneficial illustration of the fluidity of these identities.

Relevance to Curriculum

This class will serve as a 200-level reading seminar in the History department. These courses are designed for students who have little or no background in either the topic at hand or the practice of historical thinking and analysis. Over the course of the semester, students are introduced to both the subject matter and historical methods by reading and analyzing primary and secondary sources.

I anticipate that this mapping project will serve as an important analytical tool that will ultimately improve students' writing and thinking about the past. By giving students the time and space to analyze primary sources closely, they will be able to visualize and reassess their assumptions about these narratives and hopefully come to some innovative conclusions. Once the digital mapping project is complete, I will then require that each student write an analytical essay based on the primary source. My expectation is that the resulting papers will be of greater depth and analytical rigor than papers written after simply reading the texts.

At the broader, institutional level, there is growing interest at Denison in Digital Humanities as a possible program. Given the richness of the primary sources associated with this class and the geographic and narrative possibilities they present, I can see this course incorporate further digital projects (see Sustainability below) and possibly serving as a course for a new DH program. Likewise, it could also serve as an example for other teachers in the humanities who wish to bring more DH projects into their classrooms.

Team Members

Donnie Sendelbach, Director of Educational Technology Services
Donnie has already offered considerable assistance in framing this proposal and introducing me to possible technologies. Moving forward, Donnie would attend the institute and help in the design of this (and future) assignments of the course. After the institute, I will also rely on her to provide my class with training on the tools we will be using and other technical support.

Andres (AJ) Uriarte, Research Assistant, Junior History Major
I plan on hiring AJ as a research assistant over the summer and into the next school year to help in planning this project. AJ is currently in a course taught by Dr. Trey Proctor entitled "Digital History Methods: Runaway Slave Ads," so he will have some familiarity with potential tools and how they are used in the classroom. I plan on consulting him over the summer as my project develops, asking him to research tools, locate additional captivity narratives, and the

like. It is unlikely he will be able to attend the Institute because he is pursuing an internship this summer. However, remotely working with the team during the Institute may be a possibility depending on his schedule.

Timeline

This course will be taught in the Spring of 2021. During the institute I would like to identify the platform I will be using (ArcGIS Online, StoryMaps, or GoggleEarth), create a prototype of an online map, and draft the assignment. The rest of the summer I will be working with AJ to create a map based on a primary source that would serve as an example for students in the class. I plan on using the Fall of 2020 to finalize the assignment in consultation with Donnie and AJ.

Deliverable: By the end of the course, I plan to have a series of maps created by students each based on a different primary source narrative. These maps will be housed on the platform we are using.

Experience with the Digital Technology or Method Proposed

The technology options I am considering all seem to be eminently accessible and equipped for the project I envision. Furthermore, Denison's ETS team has had experiences using ArcGIS Online with a humanities course on archaeology in Italy. In addition to Donnie's assistance with this, Trent Edmunds (Instructional Technologist) will also be instrumental in setting up the necessary accounts and possible training. By the end of this semester, AJ will also have some experience with using these tools as a student.

Ethical Considerations

None for this project.

Sustainability

Because we will be using well-established tools, the maps that we will be creating will be housed within the platforms themselves. This is particularly helpful because I hope that each iteration of this course will add to a "bank" of maps that can be a reference point for future students. As a result, over time students should be able to see broader patterns and draw increasingly more complex conclusions about these sources.

In addition, for future iterations of this course, I am also interested in adding further digital projects. For example, a textual analysis component analyzing how identity was framed and written about in these narratives would add another analytical layer to the kinds of explorations students could make of these texts. Tools such as Voyant, Mallet, or TAPoR could provide the basis of these future assignments. Additionally, there may also be an opportunity to think about differences between historical spaces and contemporary maps/boundaries using georeferencing and overlaying historical maps with current ones.

Assessment

I have a good sense of what a "regular" primary source analysis produces, so I do hope that I will be able to see a significant improvement in the quality of the analysis in papers produced after this mapping project. However, in order to more formally gauge improvement, I will have students write a short analysis of the primary source after their first read and before we start the project. I will then be able to compare--at the individual student level--the depth of their analysis

and conclusions before and after we have spent time mapping and visualizing the source. Once the project and paper are completed, I will also ask students to write a self-reflection specifically on how the technology component contributed to their learning.

Accessibility

The tools we would be using are public platforms, so I believe they would already meet standards for disability access. I know that Denison is committed to making sure materials online are accessible to everyone so I will check with Denison staff supporting accessibility as the project expands (or as materials are added) to make sure whatever work is produced continues to meet those standards

Why CODEX?

I believe that the outcomes outlined for the CODEX institute regarding planning, prototyping, and teamwork are just what I need at this stage of my design for this course. Being able to spend several days away from campus to focus on this work will be immensely beneficial.

In addition, because I have little experience with digital projects in the classroom, I am also eager to learn from other teams and see their work as it progresses throughout the week. In particular, because I am interested in incorporating other kinds of projects for this class beyond mapping, being able to see other projects "in action" will likely serve as inspiration for revising this and future iterations of the course.