

Long live the Middle Ages!

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A “persistent presence of the Middle Ages” exists in New Orleans, says Michael Kuczynski, a medieval scholar and associate professor of English. Kuczynski teaches Medieval New Orleans, a Tulane InterDisciplinary Experience Seminar designed to introduce first-year students to the city's medieval connections.



Michael Kuczynski, associate professor of English, has devoted his scholarly career to medieval studies. He encourages students to delve into the wonders of the Middle Ages. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

From handling a Bible that was printed in Strasbourg in the 15th century and is now housed in [Rare Books](#) in Special Collections of Howard-Tilton Memorial Library to hearing tunes authentically played by [Musica da Camera](#), an ensemble dedicated to performing medieval music, students experience up close the city's link to the

literature and culture of a faraway time.

Kuczynski's course examines the 19th and 20th century medieval revival that influenced iconic New Orleans cultural institutions such as Mardi Gras, the "festival of fools," and the Richardson Romanesque style architecture of Gibson, Tilton and Norman Mayer halls on the Tulane campus.

Henry Hobson Richardson was a Tulane-educated architect who invented this medieval revival form of architecture, says Kuczynski.

The class also addresses the political ideology of Southern white aristocrats during the Reconstruction period. Students read Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain saw Mardi Gras not as a pleasant, nostalgic festival but as a custom with "pernicious" political roots, including the idealization of feudal life with its glorification of nobility and paternalistic notions about serfdom.

After students take the one-credit TIDES class, they often sign up for courses that [Kuczynski](#) teaches on Chaucer, Robin Hood and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. He also teaches classes on the relationship between the visual arts and literature in the medieval period and medieval religious drama.

Through the [TIDES](#) class, "students become fascinated by how persistent the medieval past is in their immediate present," says Kuczynski. By way of that interest and enthusiasm, they want to learn more "about the historical reality of the Middle Ages, not the Middle Ages as it was revived in the 19th century by various cultural and political figures but as it existed on its own terms."