History is full of crisis. From big battles that changed the fate of continents to stories of unrequited love that only mattered to one or two sad souls, what we know about the past is often centered on painful experiences. These crises didn't just change the lives of the people who wrote history; they changed the way history writing worked. This class examines how crisis changed both people and the literary practices of people who wrote history. We'll look at how an author's personal response to crisis shaped the limits of their text, the literary themes on which they depended, and the ways in which they characterized the people around them.

From the Battle of Thermopylae to the Fall of Rome to the Black Death, we'll focus on large-scale crises, the societies they affected and the texts written by people who lived through crisis. We'll also come face to face with personal crises—Augustine's religious conversion; the anguished advice written by Dhuoda for her captive son; and the lifelong complaints of Peter Abelard, a man castrated for love—through the eyes of the people who experienced them. We'll ask several questions to help us understand these authors and the texts they produced in times of crisis:

- What is crisis? Is it something experienced at the personal level? By an organized group of people (by a town or city; by country or religion)? By a broad spectrum of people with little in common except the crisis (disease and natural disaster)?
- How does crisis change people? How does crisis change the cultural and social norms people create and are shaped by?
- How does history function as a literary genre? How do the specifics of a crisis shape the kinds of literary choices authors make as they construct their histories?

This approach treats historical records as literary responses to crisis and conflict. Specifically, we'll look at accounts of tense moments in a variety of historical texts, including military, political, religious, and personal records of the past. In all of these readings, we'll make arguments about the relationship between authorial choices and the historical context of the author, the crisis itself, and the cultural values that surrounded the authorship of a particular text.

**Readings and Texts**

The readings for this course are either available for purchase in print from the bookstore as well as in print or Kindle edition from Amazon.com; or available on OnCourse by the instructor (noted on syllabus). Students are expected to bring assigned readings to each class meeting, whether in print or electronic form.

To purchase:


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