

# National Antiquities: Genealogies, Hagiographies, Holy Objects

REES 1174, cross-list HIST 0723, Benjamin Franklin Seminar  
Instructor: Prof. Julia Verkholtantsev (Russian and East European Studies)

## Course Description and Objectives

Human societies have always wanted to know about their origins, the reasons for their customs, the foundations of their social institutions and religious beliefs, and the justification of their power structures. They have conceived of creation myths and of origin stories for their communities in order to position themselves within the past and present of the natural and human worlds. In early Middle Ages, the newly Christianized kingdoms faced the challenge of securing a place in the new vision of universal providential history and legitimizing the rule of their kings and royal dynasties. They inscribed their own histories into the narratives they knew from the authoritative sources of the time – biblical genealogies and heroic stories inherited from the poets of classical antiquity. The deeds and virtues of saintly kings and church hierarchs provided the necessary continuity of historical narrative on the sacred map of time and space.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, interest in medieval antiquity as a source of inspiration and rhetoric for the construction of cultural and national identities brought about a critical study of evidence, but it also effected reinterpretation and repurposing of this evidence vis-à-vis a new political concept – that of a nation.

We will focus on Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and explore three categories of “national antiquities” that have been prominent in the workings of their modern nationalisms: (1) stories of ethnogenesis that narrate and explain the beginnings and genealogy of peoples and states, as they are recorded in medieval and early modern chronicles, (2) narratives about holy people, who are seen as national patron-saints, and (3) material objects of sacred significance (manuscripts, religious ceremony objects, crowns, icons and body relics) that act as symbols of political, cultural and national identities.

## **Approach**

We will read medieval sources and ask the question of what they tell us about the mindset of the authors and societies that created them. We will think about how the understanding of the past helped medieval societies legitimize the present and provide a model for the future. We will also examine how medieval narratives and artifacts have been interpreted and repurposed in modern times – first, during the “Romantic” stage of national awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then in the post-imperial era of independent nation-states, and, finally, in the post-Soviet context of reimagined Europe. At the end of the semester, we will observe that the study of nationalistic mentality enhances our understanding of how the past is presented and repurposed in scholarship and politics.

## **Objectives.**

In this course, students will

- gain familiarity with and experience in interpreting a variety of forms of pre-modern literary texts (historiographic, hagiographic and popular narrative), as well as various types of material artifacts;
- develop appreciation of particular methodological approaches, necessary to work with historical texts and identify their audience, uses, limitations and biases;
- cultivate skills necessary to understand and make use of academic studies by identifying and analyzing the evidence and arguments that authors make based on that evidence;
- practice skills necessary to form analytical questions and arguments in class discussion and homework writing;
- develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of historical and social change;
- form an understanding of how national traditions develop and get “invented,” and how these traditions create and shape collective identities.

## **Course Materials**

In most units, the readings are organized in a similar pattern and include (1) primary sources, (2) background readings that provide historical and methodological context, (3) case studies of how a premodern narrative or artifact under examination has been reinterpreted and repurposed in modern (i.e., post-1800) political and cultural contexts.

All reading materials are available in electronic format on Canvas. All films are available via streaming through the Library website.

## **Coursework at a Glance (tentative)**

- ~~~ Consistent attendance and active participation in class discussions
- ~~~ Report on additional reading (10%)
- ~~~ 2-3 Home reading reflections and discussion prompts of about 400-500 words (10%)
- ~~~ Reading Quizzes (30%)
- ~~~ Book or Article Review (20%)
- ~~~ Final Project: presentation and essay about a “National Antiquity” (1,500 words) (30%)

# Schedule of Topics

## Week 1.

Myths of Origin, Holy People and Sacred Objects as National Antiquities. Basic Concepts and Approaches to Nationalism. Regions of Europe: What is “Central” (East-Central), “Eastern” and “Western” Europe?

## Week 2.

Ethnicity and Nationalism

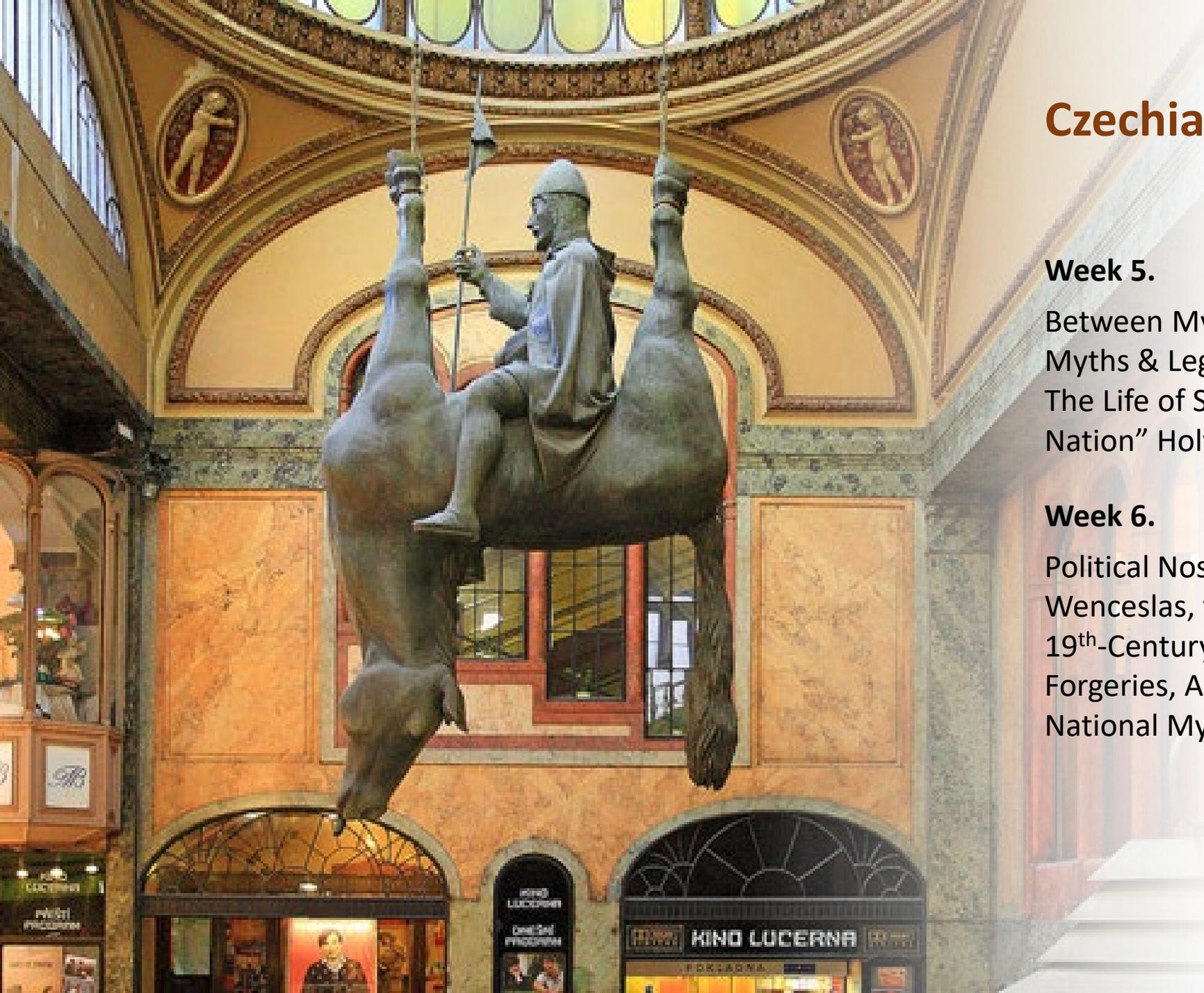
## Week 3.

Medieval Origins of Central Europe. Nations without States, States without Nations

## Week 4.

Historians and Nationalism. Myth and History. National Antiquities





## Czechia: Bohemia and Moravia

### Week 5.

Between Myth and History: Foundational origin Myths & Legends and Czech National Identities  
The Life of St. Wenceslas and the “Father of the Nation” Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV

### Week 6.

Political Nostalgia: the Sword and Army of St. Wenceslas, the Knights of Blanik  
19<sup>th</sup>-Century National Revival: Czech Manuscript Forgeries, Art, National Theater  
National Myths in the New Czech Liberalism



# Hungary

## Week 7.

The Pagan and Christian Past of Hungary as glorious beginnings: Attila the Hun and the Scythian Identity

## Week 8.

The King of Hungary St. Stephen, the Hungarian Holy Crown as a National and Political Symbol. The Politics of Royal Sainthood Today and St. Stephen's Right Hand

# Poland

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## **Week 9.**

A New Chosen People? Gallus Anonymus's Narrative about Poland and its Rulers.

Myths of Origin in Vincent's Chronicle

## **Week 11.**

Polish National Mythology and Messianism. The wonderworking Czestochowa Icon of the Most Holy Mother of God. The Saints in Polish History.





# Ukraine (vs. Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland)

**Week 11.**

**Ukraine (vs. Russia)**

- Who Holds the proverbial Keys to Kyiv? The Myth of Kievan-Kyivan Rus, Yaroslav the Wise's Bones and the Cap of Vladimir Monomakh

**Week 12.**

**Ukraine (vs. Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland)**

- The Myth of Grand Duchy: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania between Ukraine, Belarus and Poland



# Research Module

Week 13.

Workshopping Research Projects

Week 14.

Drawing Conclusions. Final Presentations

