# Medieval Storytelling and Analogous Oral Traditions Today: Two Digital Databases

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We are pleased to present two open-access digital databases of video clips from performances of medieval narratives and analogous living oral storytelling traditions: *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase* (http://www.nyu.edu/pmnt, [*PMNT*]) and *Arthurian Legend in Performance* (https://vimeo.com/ArthurPerform, [*ALP*]).

While in the process of editing, along with our colleague Nancy Freeman Regalado, a book entitled *Performing Medieval Narrative* (Vitz et al. 2005), we came up against a challenge: to most people, including many academics, it was simply inconceivable that the narrative literature of the medieval past had been performed. The underlying thinking, at least among scholars in modern literature departments, was that such works survive as books, and that books are to be read—silently. People were of course aware of references to performance within medieval texts, but these references did not seem believable or, more precisely, such performances were not imaginable. Most people had never seen narrative works from the Middle Ages performed and had trouble understanding how they could be performed. Their primary experience with live storytelling was typically the type of bookish entertainment provided for children in public libraries and independent bookshops. Storytelling in the West has been largely infantilized in the past century, making it difficult for many people to understand how adults of any level of sophistication might in the past have enjoyed watching and listening to the performance of narrative—in other words, storytelling.

To help people conceptualize ways in which narratives might have been performed in the Middle Ages, and to experiment with various new ways medieval narratives might be performed for audiences today, we began work on our website *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase*. We created the pilot version of *PMNT* with a team from the Digital Studio of New York University Libraries, with Jennifer Vinopal as Project Manager.[1] Launched in 2004, the website was hacked in 2011. When forced to shut down *PMNT*, we migrated the contents and rebuilt the site with the generous support of Vinopal and the team at NYU's Digital Studio. Benefiting from technological advancements, the new *PMNT*, launched in 2012 at http://www.nyu.edu/pmnt, allows for broader and easier searching of its contents, and, unlike our original site, can be accessed from smartphones and other mobile devices.

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[1] See further Lawrence and Vinopal 2005.

Fig. 1. The home page of *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcas*e (http://www.nyu.edu/pmnt).

*PMNT* currently offers over 225 video clips of performed scenes selected from medieval narratives, as well as relevant general resource tools, including a bibliography, videography, and tips for using the site in teaching.[2] The website includes the work of a wide range of authors from the Early and High Middle Ages, but also, when relevant, from antiquity, the Renaissance, and the modern era. Many genres (allegories, ballads, epics, fables, fabliaux, hagiographies, *lais*, romances, satires, songs, and tales) are represented, pulling from a wealth of myths, legends, and stories (Anglo-Saxon, Arthurian, Biblical, Buddhist, Celtic, Christian, Classical, Germanic,

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[2] On using the *PMNT* and *ALP* digital databases in teaching at middle school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels, see the special journal issue (Vitz and Lawrence 2012c) of *The Once and Future Classroom: Resources for Teaching the Middle Ages in Grades K-12* that The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages dedicated to both *PMNT* and *ALP* websites, including our introductory article (Vitz and Lawrence 2012b).

Islamic, Jewish) as well as popular tales (of Charlemagne and Roland, Renart the Fox, Robin Hood, Tristan, and others).[3]

Oral and written traditions tend not to be discrete or autonomous—tradition is often a two-way street—and the majority of medieval "oral" works we possess today are indeed preserved in writing. Our website therefore does not focus exclusively on works from oral tradition. We emphasize medieval works that invited—and still invite—performance approaches other than silent reading. Performances represented on the site range from simple, solo storytelling to more theatrical staging by ensembles. Clips might include singing, puppets, props, sets, costumes, dance, or instrumental music—or just a single performer reciting a scene from a story. Users can view performances in a number of languages: Egyptian Arabic, Medieval Latin, Old French, Middle High German, Hebrew, Italian (Renaissance and Modern), Renaissance Croatian, Karakalpak, Norn, and Turkish, as well as English (Old, Middle, and Modern, plus Lowland Scots).

We have been fortunate to involve in the project a number of international professional performers of narrative working today, including Benjamin Bagby, Katarina Livljanic, Paolo Panaro, and Linda Mare Zaerr. In addition, many clips come from the work of students in Vitz's undergraduate course Acting Medieval Literature, which she has taught at New York University yearly for over a decade.[4] This course, in which students perform from all works on the syllabus, attracts students from various drama studios in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, as well as students in NYU's College of Arts and Science. The work of such talented young performers brightens and broadens the offerings on the website, representing the creativity of a new generation of storytellers.

*PMNT* also contains rare and valuable footage of ancient and medieval material still being performed today by professional performers who have inherited centuries of living oral traditions. The clips, contributed from scholars around the world, provide evidence of the continuation today of storytelling traditions analogous to those of the medieval period. We include such clips on the website in order to shed light on how narratives might been performed in the Middle Ages, although they may be of interest to scholars of oral traditions for other reasons as well. We hope to be able to locate other such valuable clips, and we welcome suggestions and contributions.

One such clip ([http://mednar.org/2012/06/17/edige-scene-from-turkic-epic/](http://mednar.org/2012/06/17/edige-scene-from-turkic-epic/)) shows Jumabay Bazarov (1927-2006), a *jyrau* (professional performer of oral epic) in Karakalpakistan, Uzbekistan, performing part of the Turkic *Edige*, a medieval heroic epic about the Golden Horde.[5] Filmed in 1993 by *PMNT* Advisory Board member Karl Reichl, the clip provides a concrete example of how a type of traditional epic was in the past, and still is today, performed in one part of the world. Here the *jyrau* sings and tells his story in Karakalpak, a Turkic language, accompanying himself on an archaic fiddle called the *kobyz*. Full of fanciful elements, yet with

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[3] For more details on the contents and navigation of *PMNT* and *ALP*, see Vitz and Lawrence 2012a.

[4] See further Vitz 2005.

[5] See further Reichl 2000, 2007. For information on oral tradition in regard to medieval literature more generally, see Reichl 2012.

some basis in fourteenth-century historical reality, *Edige* was a popular story known to have circulated for centuries in several versions. In the clip the *jyrau* recounts how the wife of the khan of the Golden Horde warns her husband to kill Edige before he can seize the throne. For the clip—as for all clips on the site—*PMNT* gives basic, fundamental information, including a brief description of the scene performed, the narrative and its genre, the performer, and—if the work has been recorded in writing—the edition. Where applicable, a translation of the narrative is also provided.
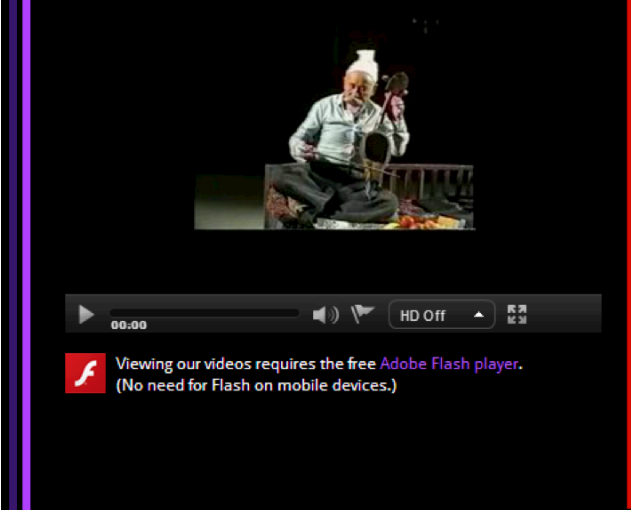
**The Performance**

**Performance Descriptors:**
Instruments; Performers, Solo; Song
**Instruments:**
Chordophones
**Performer Category:**
Professional Performer
**Performer(s) / Ensemble(s):**
Bazarov, Jumabay
**Language(s) of Performance:**
Karakalpak
**Setting:**
Public Performance Setting
**Geographical Location:**
Uzbekistan

**The Work**

**Work Title:**
Edige
**Author:**
Anonymous
**Genre:**
Epic
**Subject:**
Other
**Period:**

**Language:**
Karakalpak

Viewing our videos requires the free Adobe Flash player. (No need for Flash on mobile devices.)

**About the scene and clip:**
The performer, called a jyrau, sings and tells a scene from the epic *Edige*, accompanying himself on the kobyz, an archaic fiddle. In this scene, the khan of the Golden Horde is warned by his wife to kill Edige before he can seize the khan's throne.

We include this remarkable clip of a contemporary performance of epic as part of our exploration of analogous traditions: it sheds light on how medieval epics may have been performed.

**About the work:**
*Edige* is a medieval heroic epic about the Golden Horde, composed in Karakalpak, a Turkic language. It sings of Edige—his magical birth (his mother was a river fairy), his struggles at the court of the khan, his marriage to the daughter of Tamerlane (Sätemir), his battles, and his death. This epic has some basis in 14th-century historical reality despite its many fanciful features. Numerous versions of the epic are known to have existed.

**About the genre:**
The epic is an ancient genre and is found in almost every culture. It is a long heroic narrative which tells of war and great deeds. Epics are generally composed in verse, and sung from memory or improvised in performance by professional performers with instrumental accompaniment. These narratives are created from traditional elements, commonly without recourse to writing, by poets whose names are often unknown to us. Among the famous traditional epics are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer; the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*; and the Old French *Song of Roland*. Many known poets adopt epic forms and themes for their literary verse (such as Virgil in his *Aeneid*).

**About the edition/translation:**
*Edige: A Karakalpak Oral Epic as Performed by Jumabay Bazarov*, ed. and trans. Karl Reichl, Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, FF Communications 293, 2007.

**About the performer/ensemble:**
Jumabay Bazarov (1927-2006) was a jyrau—a professional performer of oral epic—in Karakalpakistan in Uzbekistan. For further information on this performer, see Karl Reichl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2000, pp. 37-9.

**About the production:**
This video was filmed in Uzbekistan in September 1993 by Karl Reichl of the Advisory Board of this website. We are grateful to him for making this video available to us.

Fig. 2. The *jyrau* Jumabay Bazarov performs the Turkic *Edige* in Karakalpakistan, Uzbekistan (http://mednar.org/2012/06/17/edige-scene-from-turkic-epic/).

Another example of living oral storytelling on the website is the performance of an epic from the Egyptian Hilali tribe about the hero Abu Zayd, who rescues the royal family of Iraq from oppressors (http://mednar.org/2012/06/13/hilali-epic-awadallah-sings-of-abu-zayd/).



# Performing Medieval Narrative Today
## A Video Showcase

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### Hilali epic: Awadallah sings of Abu Zayd

**The Performance**

**Performance Descriptors:** Instruments; Performers, Solo; Recitation from Memory; Song
**Instruments:** Membranophones
**Performer Category:** Professional Performer
**Performer(s) / Ensemble(s):** Abd aj-Jalil Ali, Awadallah
**Language(s) of Performance:** Arabic, Egyptian
**Setting:** Public Performance Setting
**Geographical Location:** Egypt

**The Work**

**Work Title:** Amir Khafaji: Abu Zayd
**Author:** Anonymous
**Genre:** Epic
**Subject:** Islamic Legends/History
**Period:** Early Middle Ages: 9th-11th century; Unknown
**Language:** Arabic, Egyptian

**About the scene and clip:**
This video shows performances drawn from the Egyptian epic devoted to the hero of the Hilali tribe, *Abu Zayd*, sung by a traditional Hilali performer and recorded by the ethnographer Susan Slyomovics. The performer sings the epic, accompanying himself on a drum and interacting frequently with the audience. He performs as storyteller, with great emphasis on wordplay and punning; there is relatively little attempt to impersonate the characters. In the video, we first see Awadallah in the town square, surrounded by his audience of men. Then, he begins to speak to his listeners, telling them that he is a "merchant of art." The singer continues the performance in his home, singing about Abu Zayd, frequently holding his drum against his ear. Medieval epics like Old French *The Song of Roland* were probably performed in quite an analogous manner: sung by solo professional performers to instrumental accompaniment, with only modest levels of character impersonation, and with substantial interaction with (at least originally) a largely male audience.

**About the work:**
A vast epic tells the history of the Bani Hilal tribe of Bedouin Arabs of Egypt. The earliest parts of their story go back to the

Fig. 3. Awadallah Abd aj-Jalil Ali performs the Egyptian Hilali epic *Abu Zayd* in Aswan, Egypt (http://mednar.org/2012/06/13/hilali-epic-awadallah-sings-of-abu-zayd/).

Recorded in 1983 by ethnographer Susan Slyomovics, the clip shows Awadallah Abd aj-Jalil Ali, a professional performer in Aswan, Egypt, singing the epic while accompanying himself on a drum, emphasizing wordplay and punning over character impersonation in his performance.[6] Interacting frequently with his largely-male audience, Awadallah starts his performance in the town square and then moves his audience into his own house. *Abu Zayd* originated in the eighth

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[6] The video accompanies Slyomovics 1987.

and ninth centuries, when the Bani Hilal tribe of Bedouin Arabs moved out of the Arabian Peninsula to settle eventually in Egypt, and grew and developed into a vast epic that is still performed in cafes and marketplaces by professional storytellers such as Awadallah.

Also of potential interest to scholars of oral storytelling traditions are performances of the anonymous Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* (which may date from as early as the seventh century) by Paris-based American vocalist and medievalist Benjamin Bagby, a member of the Advisory Board of *PMNT* and director of the medieval music ensemble Sequentia, which he founded in 1977 with the late Barbara Thornton. Performing in Old English, Bagby bases his performance



Fig. 4. Benjamin Bagby performs the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* in Helsingborg, Sweden (http://mednar.org/2012/06/15/beowulf-beowulf-fights-grendel/).

choices on our understanding of medieval musical practice and theory. Bagby exploits multiple facets of voice (singing, speaking, heightened speech, unusual sounds) and accompanies himself on a six-stringed harp (with strings of equal length, often called a lyre today) tuned in the mode of the epic to produce a collection of modal gestures that he uses at various moments and in various ways to help convey his story (to denote passage of time, introduce new characters, change scenes, and so on).[7] Through the work of performers such as Bagby, medieval oral storytelling traditions that at some point perished are now resurrected for today's audiences in new performances in a traditional vein, informed by our understanding of medieval performance practices.

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[7] See further Bagby 2005.

Fig. 5. Benjamin Bagby performs the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf in New York (http://mednar.org/2012/02/13/beowulf/).

The website does not distinguish between re-created and living performances, except to the extent that there is a distinction between student and professional performers (the latter being somewhat more apt to represent living traditions in the narrow sense of the term). This lack of distinction results from our primary goal: to present all of these narratives as still alive—as still inviting performance. Our approach also reflects the perspective that even living traditions have unquestionably evolved over time and have not remained fixed or fossilized in their performance styles.

*Arthurian Legend in Performance*, launched in 2011 at https://vimeo.com/ArthurPerform, was born of the same desire to make performances of medieval narratives accessible to the public, but it has a purpose slightly different from that of *PMNT*. Whereas *PMNT* seeks to build a broad collection of varied subject matter, *ALP* concentrates exclusively on Arthurian legend, which is widely taught and studied in secondary schools, college courses, and graduate programs. *ALP* serves as a focused resource specifically for teachers and students of Arthurian material. Moreover, the continued development of *ALP* involves our active creation and production of new performances, whenever possible in the work's original language and, where appropriate, with suitable musical accompaniment. Thus, our work on *ALP* involves the larger project of recruiting talented performers capable of performing medieval narratives in original medieval languages and producing those performances in high-quality video.[8] The Vimeo format

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[8] The *ALP* project is made possible in part thanks to funding from TEAMS: The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages.

of *ALP* emphasizes video over text; *ALP* therefore includes less metadata than *PMNT*. *ALP* limits textual information to a concise, basic minimum, thus foregrounding the videos themselves.



Fig. 6. The homepage of the website *Arthurian Legend in Performance* (https://vimeo.com/ArthurPerform).

*ALP* offers performances of scenes from a range of Arthurian works found on many course syllabi, whether primarily Arthurian or featuring Arthurian passages or characters, including Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, *Culhwch and Olwen*, Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*, Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. *ALP* also presents to the public lesser known Arthurian works in Byzantine Greek, Medieval Welsh, and Hebrew. Clips such as that from the *Welsh Triads*, performed by Celticist Matthieu Boyd, can be of particular interest to scholars of oral traditions.

Fig. 7. Matthieu Boyd performs the *Welsh Triads* in New York (http://vimeo.com/45391853).

Boyd's performance (http://vimeo.com/45391853)—executed partly in Medieval Welsh and partly in Modern English in order to enable the audience to experience the original language while also maintaining comprehensibility—highlights the powerfully mnemonic construction of the *Welsh Triads* (for example, everything worth remembering is set into a list of three items, and the lists exist in multiple versions). The fundamental oral features of the *Welsh Triads* and of other medieval stories captured in clips in *ALP* resemble those of many works flowing from oral traditions around the world.

We continue to expand the offerings of *PMNT* and *ALP*, and we welcome suggestions for additions to the collections as well as ideas for collaboration with scholars, performers, teachers, and directors of other digital archival sites. We seek out living oral traditions relevant to medieval storytelling, nurture new performances of medieval material in a traditional manner, and also foster fresh approaches to the performance of traditional medieval narratives. By capturing such performances digitally and offering the clips on our two open-access websites, we aim to share examples of medieval storytelling that are still alive and to promote the creation of

performances of medieval narrative by a new generation of storytellers. Knowing that centuries-old storytelling traditions hold an intimate and powerful place in the heart of communities around the world, we use digital technology to offer access to such performances to a broad, global public in the international village square of the Internet.

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