

What would you like teachers and students to know about the period c. 1000 to c. 1348?

During the Historical Association's Teacher Fellowship course on the later Middle Ages I asked a number of historians to sum up what they would like teachers and students to know about the period c. 1348-c. 1530. The variety of answers and the insights provided made them a natural inclusion in this publication (see pages 10-11), along with the new set of replies about the period c. 1000-c. 1348 you can see below. It's worth adding that I told the historians that I wasn't seeking a list of events but hoping they could set a broader context. After that I left the choice of what to include and how to structure their replies entirely up to them. The question now is how to use these insights to enhance students' understanding of the Middle Ages!

Ian Dawson

Stephen Church

Professor of Medieval History, University of East Anglia

The period c. 1000-c. 1340 was one in which England, Scotland, and Wales became intertwined with the mainstream of European civilisation. That civilisation was for the most part French. The mounted warrior, who represented the high ideals of French aristocratic society, was the knight, *le chevalier*, united by the chivalric ideals that had their roots in the heartlands of the French kingdom. In England, after the Norman Conquest, the language of the high aristocracy was French with all that entailed about the society which they inhabited. Soon, the Scottish aristocracy followed suit, with French quickly supplanting Scots as the language of the elite centred in the lowland regions in the east of the country. When Wales and Ireland were conquered by the incoming English, these territories, too, became part of the cultural mainstream.

In England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the period also witnessed the beginnings of something we can recognisably see as the state. The state had not yet come fully into existence, since this was still the age of kingdoms as personal property: this was an age of estates not states. But the structures that will underpin the state were created in this period. It was during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries that the shires – the fundamental building blocks of the state – were established. Governed by the shire reeve (the sheriff), the shire played the role of the smallest part of the structure of royal administration. On the basis of the shire, justice was dispensed, tax collected, armies mustered, and the king's word and authority made real. The sheriff answered for his actions to the exchequer for royal revenue and to the justices for good law and governance. It was in this period, too, that Parliament emerged whereby those in central authority might be held accountable for their actions by the community of the realm, and its members were collected together, in part, on the basis of the shire. This was the period, too, when urban communities were created, emerging to be both politically and economically central to the kingdoms which they inhabited.

Katherine Harvey

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It seems an obvious point to make, but I'd like students to be aware of the human dimension of medieval history. It is easy to think of the Middle Ages solely in terms of kings and parliaments, churchmen and crusades – and of course these things are very important. But we should also consider the people who were involved in the big events and processes which we study. For example, the Norman Conquest had major political consequences, but what was the human cost of the Harrying of the North – not only in terms of death and destruction, but also how the English felt about their new rulers? Castles were another important tool of Norman colonisation, but they were also home to men, women and children who ate dinner, fell ill, fell in love and had nightmares.

Religion is a key dimension of our understanding of the Middle Ages, but medieval Christianity is too often considered to be a monolithic, top-down phenomenon. Again, I'd like students to think about individual experience – about the monk who wept as he contemplated the suffering of Christ, the crusader who embarked on the perilous journey to Jerusalem in the hope of remitting his sins, the parishioner who attended church but privately doubted the truth of what the priest taught her. What's more, there were plenty of people in medieval England who were not Roman Catholics – including a small number of heretics and, until the expulsion of 1290, a sizeable Jewish population.

These varied personal experiences matter because they help us relate to the distant past, but also because they enhance our understanding of it. Medieval people were different from us, in both their attitudes and behaviour – for example, the famous rages of the Angevin kings now seem undignified, but to a twelfth-century onlooker they were righteous displays of royal anger. But despite these differences, medieval people were just as complicated, contradictory and diverse as us!

Eleanor Parker

Lecturer in Medieval English, Brasenose College, Oxford

One aspect I'd want to highlight about this period is how important it is to get a sense of the multiple cultures and languages co-existing and interacting during these centuries, rather than thinking in terms of a single homogeneous 'medieval' culture. In the earlier part of the period, Britain was still very much shaped by interaction with Scandinavia; the culture of northern Britain was heavily influenced by Viking settlement, and in the eleventh century England and other areas of Britain became part of a Scandinavian empire ruled by the Danish king Cnut. Later, of course, the Norman Conquest brought a new and influential French-speaking elite, who had their own language and culture but soon developed ways to think of themselves as English. Over time these various groups intermarried and mingled, but for a person in the twelfth or thirteenth century their opportunities in life might be very much influenced by the language they spoke and the region or culture they belonged to. An educated person might switch between English, French, or Latin depending on context, and it's interesting to consider what might that mean for their sense of identity and their interactions with different groups of people.

The other thing I find fascinating about this period – a time of so much social and political change – is how powerful a belief in continuity was, even as life was changing rapidly. The Norman elite took a great interest in the Anglo-Saxon past, and through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries historians and poets were writing about Anglo-Saxon kings, heroes, and saints – creating and celebrating a romantic, re-imagined version of the culture their own ancestors had conquered. Why was it so important, in a time of change, to feel that connection to the past? It's easy to think that the changes of this period meant simply supplanting what had gone before, but it was much more complicated than that.

Levi Roach

Lecturer in History, University of Exeter

Like many historians, I see the period between 1000 and 1340 as one of significant change. At the start of these years, we see an early medieval society based on relatively simple methods of surplus extraction – one in which profits on landed estates are relatively low and largely stay in the immediate vicinity – with comparatively little trade and relatively *ad hoc* methods of governance. For all that traditional readings of this era as a 'Dark Age' are untenable, taxation was rare and unsystematic, bureaucracy limited and state structures fluid and flexible. Under new social, political and economic pressures – many of which can be traced back to the eighth and ninth centuries – more formalised means of government and commerce now emerged: coinage became plentiful, cities grew in size, bureaucracy blossomed, and administration (both state and non-state) developed apace. These developments happened at different speeds in different regions, but were linked. Cities were largest where the greatest concentrations of wealth were to be found – and where coinage allowed for complex trading networks to develop. This in turn could only be sustained by increased agrarian surplus from the countryside, now redistributed, sometimes across considerable distances, to those dwelling in the city; a surplus which when sold off there increased the circulation of coinage back to the countryside. This additional wealth provided opportunities for taxation to be reintroduced, after a long hiatus in most parts of Europe; and this (combined with the increasing wealth generated by tolls

paid by merchants and traders on the goods they brought to market) both necessitated and helped sustain increasingly formalised means of government. The result was not only the birth of bureaucracy in something approximating the modern sense. There was also a physical and visual legacy. More wealth led to more building: churches were founded and re-built, with almost all of the most famous cathedrals in Europe being erected in these years; castles were constructed; residences started to be built in stone as well as wood; bridges were constructed; and roads maintained. Thus much of what is now considered archetypically 'medieval' is a product of these heady years.

Sethina Watson

Senior Lecturer in History, University of York

I find this period so intriguing for the ways in which people were *building*, and in all walks of life. By this, I don't mean constructing in stone (although, all around us, their great castles and cathedrals, their parish churches, city walls, and remnants of monasteries and hospitals are testimony to this). I mean how they were building ways of understanding and organising life, faith, government and society. This was a period of great change, marked by the development of far-reaching ideals, institutions, and networks. To me, it was a time when people worried about what they thought and believed (indeed, how ideas worked) and, still more, how these should be put into practice. I'd point to three main themes.

Reform, and the development of religious ideas and institutions. This began with a push by the papacy to separate the church from the mud of the world (that is from what they saw as the corrupting influence of worldly people and forces, especially sex and money). Soon, new forms of religious life (and heretical challenges) flourished, as people sought to live out very different kinds of religious ideals. In the last half of the period, the focus turned to the laity: what it meant to be a good Christian and how the parish and diocese should cultivate this.

The rise of the university. Scholars criss-crossed Europe, seeking new knowledges, connections and careers. They translated classical, Arabic and Jewish texts, and changed the way life was understood and lived: what made a marriage (or a tyrant), the morality of the market, how confession worked. Graduates found careers in the law, medicine, and royal government, as well as at all levels in the church, professionalising and institutionalising these in turn.

Urbanisation. Steady population growth fuelled the expansion of markets, towns, migration and trade. Cities became corporations, with their own government, and their streets spaces for preaching, theatre and dissent, as well as commerce and social display. Here, villagers saw people of other regions, nations, and religions and new types of wealth lived alongside new types of poverty.

We today so often see change as A Good Thing, but in the Middle Ages they were not always so sure. Out of these changes above emerged new kinds of communities and, with them, controversies, as well as challenges to the religious, social and political order. In the Becket crisis and Magna Carta we see glimpses of these wider clashes. The Norman Conquest flew the banner of papal reform and, in its wake, brought new people, ideas and networks.

What would you like teachers and students to know about the period c.1348 to c.1530?

Christopher Dyer

Emeritus Professor of History, The University of Leicester

I regard it not just in material terms as a period of improvement and growing prosperity, but above all one when people became free and were able to exercise more control over their lives. Positive consequences of that can be seen around us – thousands of houses of ordinary artisans and peasants are still standing, and we know that they were built in the period because of the advances in tree-ring dating, a much more important discovery than Richard III! Many people paid for their own houses out of their profits from the land and higher wages. The construction work was done by craftsmen, especially carpenters, who worked with great skill and were well rewarded.

To continue with the building theme, look at the large amount of high-quality parish church architecture at this time, and public buildings like guildhalls, schools and almshouses, all the result of the collective efforts of communities organised into parishes, self-governing villages and towns, and fraternities. People were better off, but that does not mean that they were just selfish pursuers of their own wealth – they put a lot of time and money into community projects, expressing their ideas of the common good, advancing ethical values, helping those less fortunate than themselves.

Many features of the modern world – productive farming, industrial expansion, a healthy diet, the conquest of famine, can be seen in this period. Many dimensions of modern society in which we can take pride, like public education, social welfare provisions, an ideal of honest government, an effective legal system, protection of the individual from oppressive institutions like serfdom, can trace their roots to this period.

Catherine Nall

Senior Lecturer in Medieval English, Royal Holloway College

I'd want to communicate the complexity of the period, and to dismantle some of the myths of the Middle Ages. So I suppose consideration of Lollardy and heresy – the idea that people in the period debated issues to do with salvation and the Church; that there were debates about the availability of the Bible in English, and why that might matter. I suppose I'd want them to know that women owned businesses, worked in the fields; that educated women wrote books and read books. And along with the key events of Agincourt and the Wars of the Roses, I'd want them to know that people debated the legitimacy of violence, that some people

worried about the costs to civilians, and that 'ideas' were as important as ambition, greed etc in motivating people to choose particular paths. It's a difficult balancing act – between communicating that sense of the Middle Ages as really different, which of course it is in lots of ways, but also as peculiarly modern in other ways. The poet Thomas Hoccleve worries about how he'll support himself in old age, suffers with something that we would term depression; Margery Kempe travelled the world, negotiated a chaste marriage with her husband, owned a business, disputed with some of the key clerical figures in fifteenth-century England – but she also couldn't write and had 14 children.

Mark Ormrod

Emeritus Professor of History, University of York

1. How tiny England was: population dropping dramatically after the Black Death, and then remaining static at under three million people for the whole of the remainder of the period. Alongside the absence of electricity, internal combustion engines and chocolate, our biggest shock on being transported back to this period would be just how *empty* England was.
2. The importance of national sentiment, prompted by war with the Scots and the French, and articulated in the development of English as a written (as well as spoken) language. Fear of the enemy was universal; the sense of being 'English' was a growing preoccupation at least in the ruling elite and chattering classes.
3. The ability of central government to mobilise for war. Battles were won (and lost) not just on the basis of the bravery and tactics of the participants, but on the back of a huge fiscal and logistical machine at home that engaged a very large proportion of the population in the war effort.
4. The very heavy reliance on the personality and ability of the king to provide political and social stability, and the dramatic consequences that arose when, for various reasons, the king's leadership was absent or challenged (Peasants' Revolt, Cade's Rebellion, Wars of the Roses...). This is not just about personality politics: it's about the *power* and *trust* that the political community invested in the institution of monarchy.
5. The Tudors didn't change everything overnight, but brought to a peak trends discernible throughout the period from c.1350: new ways of governing and controlling the kingdom, royal authority over the Church; the theme of national sovereignty ('This realm of England is an empire...').

A.J. Pollard

Emeritus Professor, Teesside University

What actually captures the imagination of 14-year-olds? I guess you'll want wars and battles v the French (but only the victories, never the defeats!). I'd sooner not. I'd go for the rising living standards, emergence of yeomen and prosperous husbandmen, new woollen districts, new disposable wealth, printing and widening literacy, expansion of education opportunities, parish fraternities and drama. If you want politics, forget kings, go for popular involvement and situate popular 'uprisings' in this context. Everything to show that the fifteenth century was a dynamic era as far as 'ordinary people' were concerned (well those who survived): finally get over the C.L. Kingsford formulation of 'an age of promise'. One way to approach this, and capture the imagination, might be through the prism of the early stories of Robin Hood, which in their composition neatly span your period. It's all here: ripping yarns, violence (but no sex unfortunately); idealism, opposition to the undeserving rich and the corrupt, popular religion, criticism of monastic orders, attitudes to monarchy and all directed towards an audience of both gentry and the new 'middling sorts'. It has the great advantage of the hero, the central characters and the basic plots being familiar. Not of course the whole syllabus, but as a way of getting into some of the aspects of the late Middle Ages which are still not understood and have a direct relevance to twenty-first-century English society. In addition to selections from the Robin Hood stories (in modern English?), sources could include local church architecture, church warden accounts, testamentary evidence including bequests, inventories.

Miri Rubin

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It is striking just how integrated were the worlds of religion and learning in this period, how interested continental Europeans were in developments in England, and the English in European ideas. England developed its own brand of criticism of contemporary arrangements in the church – many of which resemble the protestant critiques of the sixteenth century – and a good example is the work of John Wyclif (1320-84), an Oxford theologian, with his novel ideas about the sacraments, on the role of secular authorities in religious life. He inspired followers among Oxford students and lower clergy – often known by the detractors as Lollards – and they further questioned the truth and efficacy of pilgrimage, sacred images, the cult of saints and the power of the sacraments. Such critique interested religious reformers as far afield as Bohemia, some of whom travelled to England in search of manuscripts of Wycliffite works. With these they hoped to support the claims of their home-grown reform movement, Hussitism, a powerful political and religious force in the later Middle Ages.

Under the close scrutiny of church and state, England did not develop the whole array of public religious expression known to Italian or Flemish towns, like movements inspired by prophecy, lay flagellant and penitential groups. But those interested in the possibilities of religious life, were inspired indeed by the rich vein of urban lay religion known as the Modern Devotion, in the cities of the Low Countries. The best seller of this milieu, a guide to religious introspection, penance and prayer, is *The Imitation of Christ* composed by Thomas à Kempis around 1420. This Latin book was not only used by monks and priests in England, but also translated into English repeatedly, often through the efforts of prominent women

interested in reform, such as Lady Margaret Beaufort (c. 1441-1509), Henry VII's mother. The English also appreciated the skill of manuscript makers – and later printers – of that region, and Netherlandish workshops habitually crafted prayer-books for export to the English market. With the coming of print the new scholarship inspired by continental humanists attracted English scholars to study abroad; in turn Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) visited England repeatedly, worked at Cambridge University, and interacted with scholars in London.

The quintessence of European intellectual, religious and scholarly integration is powerfully evident in this period, and forms an essential background to the exciting events of following decades: the collapse of unitary Christianity, and Europe's global extension.

John Watts

Professor of Later Medieval History at the University of Oxford, and Fellow and Tutor at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

I think the thing I'd emphasise is the growth of political society, to include more or less everyone. Growing government (taxation, justice, legislation/regulation) and spreading education and literacy (pastoral outreach by the church from c.1215, increased record-keeping and literate administration from c.1200, the emergence of written vernaculars – first French and then, c.1370-1430, English – and then mass-production of manuscripts, followed by printing from the 1470s) combined to create a large public of political consumers, who didn't simply use government agencies, but also critiqued them. This is what fed into the convulsive politics of the time – it wasn't just dissatisfaction or competition among social elites, such as nobles, gentry and oligarchs, but rather anger on the part of the mass of taxpayers, petty officers, jurors, litigants etc. that provoked conflict in parliaments and around the kings. Not for nothing, then, is this the great age of popular uprisings, from the 1381 'Peasants' Revolt' to the 1536 'Pilgrimage of Grace for the commonwealth'. While the huge loss of population caused by repeated visitations of the plague after 1348 caused significant social re-organisation (end of serfdom, more mobile labour force, moves towards 'capitalism' in agriculture and commerce), I personally would give priority to these political and cultural changes. Historians are going through one of their phases of depreciating politics, but one only has to look at the Middle East and the Maghreb – where events very similar to those of the Wars of the Roses are unfolding before our eyes – to see how important politics and the means of political communication still are.