IN THIS ISSUE: MEDIEVAL CHRONICLES, HISTORIES, AND LEGENDS — HOW THE PAST WAS RECORDED AND REMEMBERED

ISSUE 21

Medieval World

www.medievalworldmagazine.com | Karwansaray Publishers

CULTURE & CONFLICT

PRESERVING THE PAST

Historical writing in the Middle Ages

US $14.25
CAD $17.25

ENJOY EVEN MORE MEDIEVAL WORLD.

Introducing Medieval World Online - digital subscription plus access to full, searchable archive of all back issues with browser-based PDF viewer (**online.medievalworld magazine.com**)

Traditional paper subscription / Renewal - year (€54.95) - 2 years (€104.95)
Digital subscriptions and back issues are also available. Please visit our webshop for details (www.wssmagazine.com)
If you would like to change or update your address, please fill it in below without indicating any of the other options.

☐ Subscription / Renewal - **1 year** ☐ Subscription / Renewal - **2 years**

Title: First name: Last name:

Address:

Postal / zip code: City: State:

Country: E-mail address:

☐ Bill me for a bank transfer

☐ Bill me via PayPal

☐ Please charge my credit card:

Visa / Mastercard no:

Expires: CVC (3-digit):

Signature / Date:

Cut out or copy and send to:
Karwansaray Publishers
Postbus 4082
7200BB Zutphen
The Netherlands
Fax: +31-848-392775

Or visit our webshop:
http://www.kp-shop.com

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE

MW
CULTURE & CONFLICT

Editor-in-chief: Jasper Oorthuys
Editor: Alice Isabella Sullivan
Image research: Lauren van Zoonen
Design & media: Christy Beall

Artwork advisers: Robert W. Jones (Advanced Studies in England, Franklin and Marshall College), Robert C. Woosnam-Savage (Curator Emeritus, Royal Armouries)

Contributors: Cristian Bratu, James G. Clark, Murray Dahm, Thomas Denholm, Karl Gagesch, Rowdy Geirsson, Jonathan H, Jones, Robert Jones, Clay Vagrant, Kathryn Walton, Charlotte Wood

Illustrators: Renato Dalmaso, Richard Thomson, Marek Szyszko, William Webb

Print: Grafi Advies

Editorial office
PO Box 4082, 7200 BB Zutphen, The Netherlands
Phone: +31-848-392256 (NL)
E-mail: editor@medievalworldmagazine.com
Customer service: service@karwansaraypublishers.com
Website: www.medievalworldmagazine.com

Contributions in the form of articles, letters, reviews, news and queries are welcomed. Please send to the above address or use the contact form on www.medievalworldmagazine.com.

Subscriptions
Subscriptions can be purchased at www.kp-shop.com, via phone or by email. For the address, see above.

Distribution
Medieval World: Culture & Conflict is sold through retailers, the internet and by subscription. The exclusive distributor for the UK and the Republic of Ireland is Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT, United Kingdom. Phone: +44 (0)207 429 4000.

Medieval World: Culture & Conflict is published every two months by Karwansaray B.V., Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

ISSN (print): 2949-7566
ISSN (digital): 2949-7574

Printed in the Netherlands.

THEME: RECORDING THE PAST

Medieval authors had a unique approach to history: often created for a patron and inspired by ancient examples, they might blend facts, personal experience, and fantasy.

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

ROMANCING ALEXANDER

The life and exploits of Alexander the Great were popular reading during the Middle Ages.

HEDGELEY MOOR

This brief battle on 25 April, 1464 would eventually lead to a total Lancastrian defeat.

Medieval history news and recent discoveries

Peter Konieczny

MARGINALIA

© NIKU

Regin Meyer *(right)* knows the ruins of Selja well and is excited to add yet another building to the monastery and pilgrimage complex. He and Dag-Øyvind Engtrø Solem are currently working in front of the monastery.

MEDIEVAL DISCOVERY MADE ON NORWEGIAN ISLAND

Archaeologists working beside the ruins of Selja Monastery, a major medieval pilgrimage site on the island of Selja, off Norway's western coast, have uncovered the remains of a previously undocumented stone structure just metres from the monastic complex. The discovery, made within the first days of a new research excavation, could add a fresh chapter to what scholars know about daily life and activity on the island during the monastic period.Regin Meyer and Dag-Øyvind Engtrø Solem of the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU) are carrying out a targeted excavation at Selja's monastery and pilgrimage landscape. After only two days in the field, they encountered masonry and flagstone flooring belonging to a stone building that has not been recorded in earlier documentation of the site.

Editorial

Just like today, people during the Middle Ages were fascinated with the past, the passage of time, and how best to record it.

The surviving chronicles, annals, universal histories, and hagiographical texts, among others, offer insight into how medieval writers recorded key events, what inspired them, and even who they were as individuals. A figure like the thirteenth-century monk and historian Matthew Paris, featured in this issue, is one rare example of a visionary and innovative writer of history whose works have been valued to this day.

Medieval writers blended fact and fantasy into their narratives, enticing readers then and now. Ancient texts, epics and romances, as well as religious and personal experiences inspired their writing. In the pages that follow, read about how history was a subject of interest to medieval writers, much like it is to readers and researchers today.

Alice Isabella Sullivan, PhD
Editor, *Medieval World: Culture & Conflict*

"This is a ruin we haven't seen before, and it's located just 30 meters from the monastery. The construction suggests it dates to the High Middle Ages," says Regin Meyer.

In the Norwegian context, the High Middle Ages are generally dated to about 1130–1350, a period when ecclesiastical institutions expanded, religious travel increased, and monastic communities became more embedded in regional economies and networks.

Selja has attracted archaeological attention for more than two centuries. The island's medieval remains are well known: the monastery ruins, the former bishop's seat, and the broader pilgrimage setting connected with the cult of St. Sunniva. Yet the new building suggests there are still substantial gaps in what has been mapped and understood about how the monastic complex functioned as a lived-in, worked-in landscape rather than a single monumental ruin.

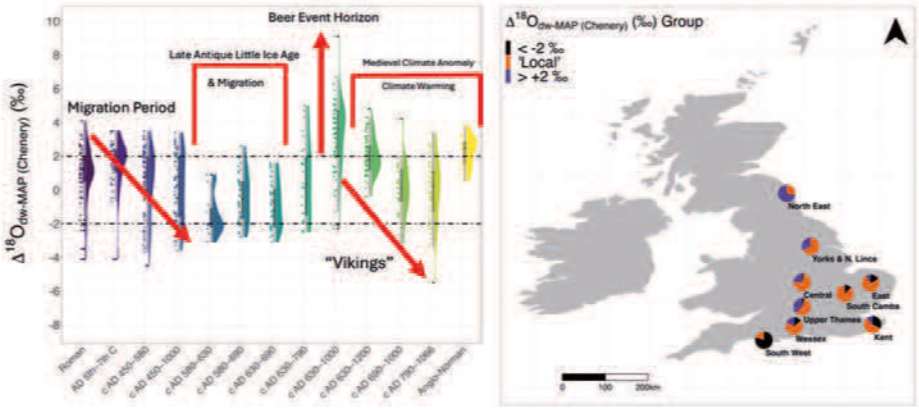
"This discovery provides an important new contribution to Selja's history and highlights the island's continued research potential," Meyer adds.

Regin Meyer is a building archaeologist with extensive experience at Selja. In earlier work at the site, he identified remains interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon stone church within the ruins of St. Sunniva's Church — possibly among Norway's earliest stone buildings.

The current excavation follows ground-penetrating radar (GPR) surveys carried out by NIKU in 2021 and 2022. Those surveys detected subsurface anomalies that were interpreted as potential archaeological structures. The team has now opened trenches north and west of the monastery to investigate what the radar signals might represent on the ground.

Selja is located in Stad Municipality in Vestland county (the Nordfjord region) on Norway's western seaboard, a short boat trip from the mainland near the village of Selje. NIKU has previously collaborated with Stad Municipality on the preservation and public presentation of Selja's medieval ruins, and that relationship continues as new finds reshape the questions researchers can ask about the site and its wider landscape.

And as this latest discovery shows, even in a place investigated for generations, the medieval ground can still produce something genuinely unexpected.



(Left) Timeline of major events in early medieval England that are discussed in the article and documented in the bioarchaeological record. *(Right)* Map showing the proportions of locals and non-locals in areas of Early Medieval England where <-2‰ are migrants from colder climates, and >+2‰ are either migrants from warmer climates or people impacted by "brewing and stewing" effects.

Study finds that early medieval England saw continuous migration

Migration into early medieval England did not happen in a single burst and then stop. A new large-scale study argues that movement remained a consistent feature of life between the end of Roman rule and the eve of the Norman Conquest, with tooth enamel chemistry and ancient DNA offering a clearer view of who was moving, when, and how patterns differed by sex and region.

The research, which is published in *Medieval Archaeology*, draws on 700 tooth-enamel isotope measurements from England in the first millennium AD and compares those results with ancient DNA *(continued on page 6)*

A merchant's lost treasure in medieval Rus

Archaeologists in western Ukraine have announced one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries in recent decades: an unprecedented cache of 573 intact medieval Rus' glass bracelets and luxury items, now known as the "Merchant's Treasure of Volodymyr." The find, uncovered during large-scale rescue excavations in 2025 at the historic Apostolshchyna site within the princely town of Volodymyr in Volyn, offers extraordinary insight into medieval craftsmanship, trade networks, and the dramatic events surrounding the Mongol-Tatar invasion of 1241.

A few of the 573 Rus' glass bracelets recently discovered in Volodymyr Ukraine.
© Viktor Bayuk via Facebook

The site had already yielded a rich variety of cultural artifacts, but this assemblage proved exceptional in both scale and preservation. The hoard includes 573 fully intact glass bracelets — the largest such concentration ever recorded in the archaeological study of the Kyivan Rus' territories — alongside dozens of precious items associated with elite religious and mercantile life.

Among the artifacts are a massive enkolpion cross traditionally linked with the vestments of a high-ranking cleric, 9 bronze and 8 marble pendant crosses, 18 diamond-shaped buckles finished with pseudo-granulation, 5 silver temple rings, a stylized trident-falcon lead inlay, a shield-shaped silver signet ring, a bronze mace head, and seals decorated with a solar symbol of the "Dorogochyn type," in addition to numerous fragments awaiting conservation and study.

What makes the discovery truly unique is the sheer quantity and diversity of the glass bracelets. While such bracelets were widely worn as women's ornaments in the pre-Mongol urban culture of Kyivan Rus', they are almost never found intact. They typically survive only in fragmentary form. The Volodymyr assemblage, by contrast, preserves hundreds of complete examples, divided into 109 distinct types.

(continued from page 5) datasets, including 316 individuals used to contrast movement and ancestry.

One of the study's most useful contributions is that it puts real numbers on how often people seem to have moved. Looking at chemical clues locked into tooth enamel, the researchers identify 296 people whose childhood signatures do not match the area where they were buried, about 42% of the total sample.

Mobility was not evenly distributed over time. The study identifies the late sixth to late eighth centuries as a period of heightened movement, with "non-locals" rising from 38% to 47%.

Migration did not affect everyone in the same way. The researchers say the data reveals "sex-based differences in mobility" and shows that the balance of "local" and "non-local" people changes over the centuries.

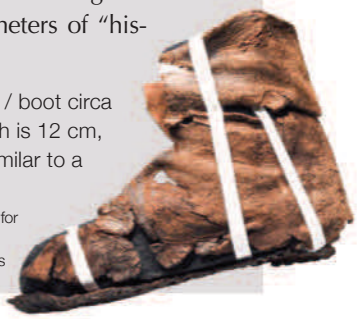
In the Roman period, the patterns for men and women look noticeably different. but between ca. AD 350 and 790, those differences become much less obvious. Men and women look more alike overall, although men may have been somewhat more likely to move.

The study argues mobility looks different depending on where you are, and even neighbouring regions can differ.

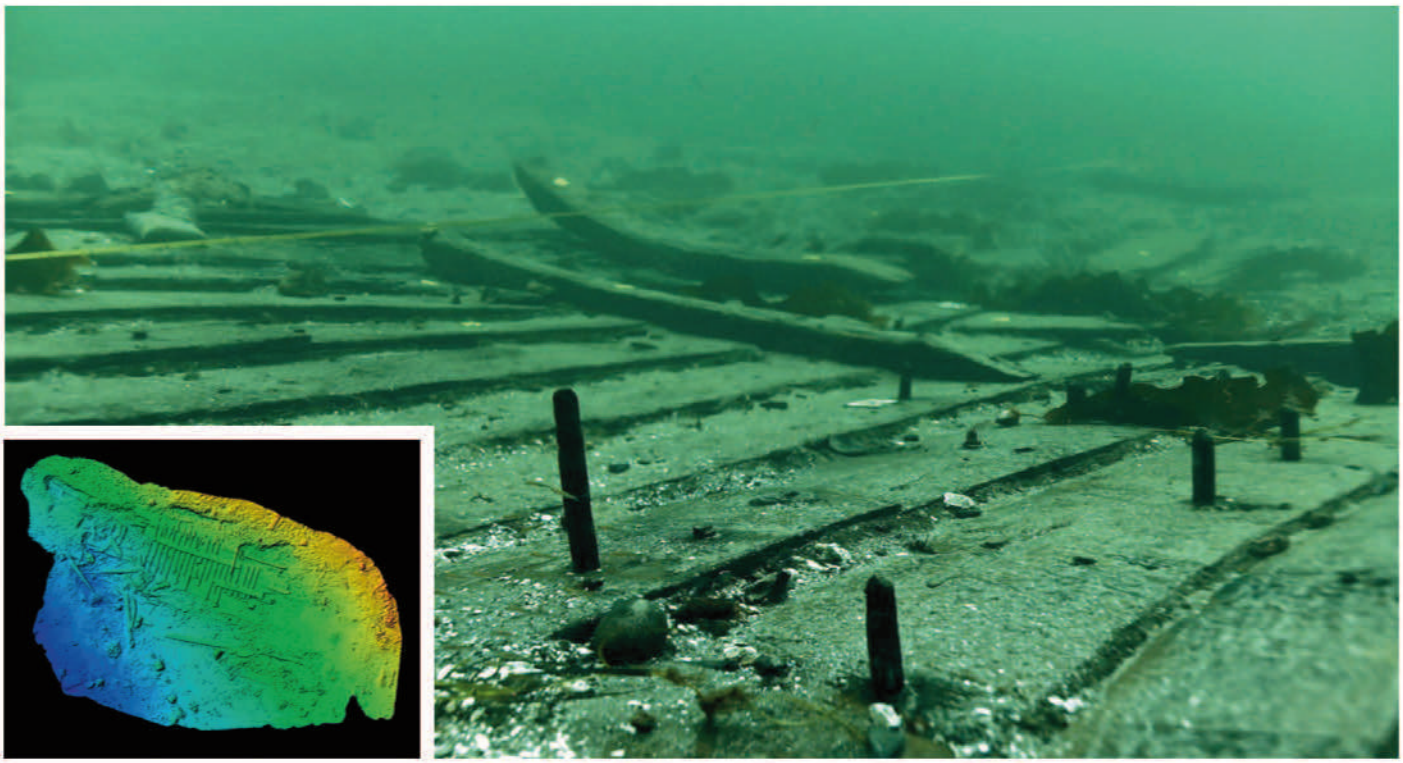
Medieval shoes

Leather shoes and a sock are among the headline medieval finds from the Molkenmarkt excavation in Berlin, alongside a small hoard of coins.

All of these discoveries were made by a team from the State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments Berlin during excavations at Molkenmarkt, in the historic centre of the German capital. This major archaeological dig has so far uncovered 700,000 objects. The Molkenmarkt project is a major revitalization of a historic area in the centre of Berlin. The archaeological work, which will continue into 2027, covers 22,000 square metres and involves digging down to an average depth of four metres and removing more than 88,000 cubic meters of "historical" subsoil.



A leather shoe / boot circa 1450. Its length is 12 cm, today that's similar to a size 19.



Closeup of the recently discovered cog on the ocean floor. *(Inset)* Phot3D model of the shipwreck after excavation. The 3D models were created using photogrammetry, a technique that combines hundreds of high-resolution photographs to generate precise digital reconstructions of the ship's structure and details.

MEDIEVAL SHIPWRECK MAY BE THE WORLD'S LARGEST COG

Maritime archaeologists from the Viking Ship Museum in Denmark have announced the discovery of what they describe as the world's largest cog: a medieval cargo vessel built around 1410 and found in the waters (Øresund) between Denmark and Sweden.

From the first dive, archaeologists realised the outline beneath the sand was not an ordinary shipwreck. As centuries of silt were cleared away, the scale of the vessel became apparent: approximately 28 metres long, 9 metres wide, and 6 metres high, with an estimated cargo capacity of around 300 tons. That size, researchers say, reflects just how large late medieval trading ships could become. This example offers a rare chance to examine construction details that are usually lost when only the lower hull survives.

The wreck, named Svælget 2 after the channel where it was discovered, was located during seabed investigations connected to Copenhagen's Lynetteholm development project. Svælget 2 appears to represent the Cog pushed to an extreme. A ship of this scale points to a trade system that was already highly organised.

One of the most striking results so far comes from dendrochronology (tree-ring dating). Researchers report that Svælget 2 was built around 1410 using timber sourced from two different regions: Pomerania (in modern-day Poland) and the Netherlands. The planks were made from Pomeranian oak, while the ship's frames (ribs) came from the Netherlands. This arrangement the team interprets as evidence of complex material supply and specialised shipbuilding capacity.

Excavated at a depth of 13 metres, the ship was shielded from many of the destructive forces that normally affect coastal wrecks. Sand is said to have protected the ship's starboard side "from keel to gunwale," giving archaeologists access to structures and fittings that rarely survive.

Another major surprise is the ship's brick-built galley, described as the earliest example of its kind from Danish waters. Around 200 bricks and 15 tiles were found, along with bronze cooking pots, ceramic bowls, and food remains.

Beyond the ship itself, Svælget 2 has yielded personal and domestic objects that rarely survive in such quantity. The excavation uncovered painted wooden dishes, shoes, combs, and rosary beads, alongside cooking and eating equipment.

Despite the ship's impressive size, archaeologists say they have found no direct trace of the cargo, only items that can be explained as ship's gear or crew possessions. The absence of ballast, the team notes, may indicate the ship was loaded heavily with trade goods when it went down. Even without the cargo, researchers stress that the evidence points to a merchant vessel rather than a warship.

Svælget 2 is not only a technological landmark but also a reflection of late medieval economic capacity. Financing, organising, and supplying a vessel of this size required more than individual ambition. The ship's components are now undergoing conservation.

Illustration from a 1353 edition of the *Tractatus quartus bu Gilles li Muisit* that shows the people of Tournai, Belgium burying victims of the Black Death.

Volcanic eruption set the stage for the Black Death

A volcanic eruption in the mid-fourteenth century may have triggered the climatic shocks that opened the door for the arrival of the Black Death in Europe, according to new research combining natural and historical evidence. The study, published in *Communications Earth & Environment*, argues that the eruption set off a cascade of cooling, agricultural crisis, and emergency grain shipments that ultimately carried the plague bacterium *Yersinia pestis* into Mediterranean ports.

The new study identifies a previously unknown volcanic eruption, or cluster of eruptions, around 1345. Ice-core data shows the eruption ranks as one of the largest sulphur injections of the past 2,000 years, suggesting a climatic impact far beyond what had been assumed. This atmospheric disturbance occurred after several smaller eruptions in 1329, 1336, and 1341, meaning Europe entered the 1340s already under climate strain. This is reported by contemporary witnesses as strange atmospheric conditions.

Tree-ring analyses from the Spanish Pyrenees indicate sudden and severe summer cooling for the years 1345 and 1346. These findings align with temperature reconstructions from across the continent. The climate downturn was a sustained, multi-year cooling episode.

The abrupt cooling led to widespread harvest failure across the western and central Mediterranean. Italy was hit particularly hard, threatening mass famine. To prevent unrest or starvation, the maritime republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa began importing massive quantities of cereals from the Black Sea region in 1347. These emergency grain shipments saved lives, but they also carried the plague. Fleas infected with *Yersinia pestis* likely travelled in grain cargo, on rodents, or in ship holds, arriving in harbours mere weeks before the first recorded outbreaks.

The researchers emphasise that the Black Death was an early example of how interconnected systems can amplify risk. Trade networks brought a pandemic.

ON THE COVER

During the Middle Ages, many histories (and other works as well) were written at the behest of a wealthy or noble patron. In some cases, this meant that the writer paid special attention to the patron's life and exploits, or glorified them in some other way. An author presenting a finished work to their patron is also a very common image at the front of many medieval manuscripts, like this example from an early sixteenth-century chronicle by Guillaume Crétin: he is shown giving his book to French king Francis I.

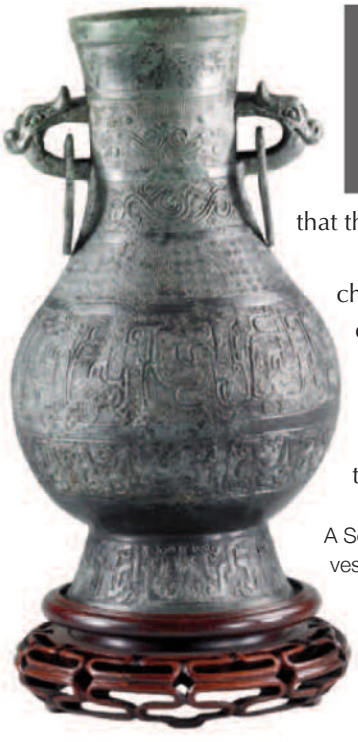
Using fire-lances and 'flying thunder-cloud eruptors', Song-dynasty soldiers defend a city. Their enemies, in turn, would soon adopt such weapons, too.
© William Webb

Wars and geopolitics of medieval China

Clay Vagrant

DEFENDING THE SONG DYNASTY

After the collapse of China's golden age in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), China fell into a period of disunity and internal division. It was not until 960 that Emperor Taizu reunited China's lands and ushered in another golden era, called the Song Dynasty. Unprecedented achievements in science, technology, commerce, and industry followed, making Song China the most advanced civilization of the medieval world.



A Song-Dynasty silver archaistic vessel (*hu*) with dragon-headed handles and a movable ring.

Despite its great advances and tremendous achievements, however, the Song Dynasty found itself beset by a bloated political system and volatile borders under pressure from rivals and hostile nations. It was not until the rise and invasion of the Mongols that the Song would ultimately fall.

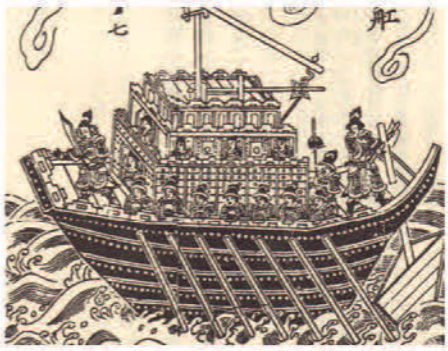
Between 907 and 960, China floundered in a period of chaos and strife known as the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" period. A general from one of the northern dynasties, Zhao Guangyin, reunited China in 960, and then ended the civil wars waged by various warlords to the south. Ruling as Emperor Taizu for the next sixteen years, he reformed the civil service to be purely meritocratic instead of merely favoring the nobility.

Taizu's promise of a secure and stable China was enticing to the masses, which were weary of war and unrest. Thus, the Song Dynasty became primarily a defensive empire that lessened the powers of the military leadership to help ensure stability and limit any threats to the government from ambitious commanders. The emperor's generals were pacified with hefty pensions in exchange for stepping down from their posts. Military governors were also replaced with civil officials. This was contrary to the preceding Tang Empire, which utilized impressive military power to expand its borders and take control of the trade routes to the West.

A Northern Song Dynasty silver *sycee*, now in the Liao Shangjing Museum, China.

As a result of the reforms of Emperor Taizu and his successor, the Song Dynasty entered a period of prosperity and cultural achievement. The results were great advancements in science and technology, which inspired numerous inventions, the cultivation of philosophy and the arts, and the start of commercial revolutions that fueled industrialization. It was also in the Song Dynasty that gunpowder was first employed in military use. Proto-cannons, rockets, and cast-iron bombs were utilized on the battlefield for the first time. The Song Dynasty also created the world's first standing navy and built advanced multi-decked ships that could hold up to one thousand sailors, soldiers, and personnel.

Overseas maritime trade with Southeast Asia blossomed during the Song Dynasty. The development of larger, more sophisticated ships facilitated the expansion of overseas commerce, leading to the eventual supplanting of rival merchants from South and Southwestern Asia. Taxation of trade in the maritime Silk Road helped to keep the government financially wealthy. The growth of domestic trade created more specialization among merchants and the organization of their guilds. Out of this growth came joint stock companies and a sophisticated financial system that allowed credit from various lenders and brokers. The economic success of Song



(Left) A Song Dynasty scroll painting showing scholars admiring a painting.
© National Palace Museum, Taipei

(Top right) A scroll painting with a portrait of Emperor Taizu, formally known as Zhao Kuangyin. He was the founder of the Song Dynasty.
© National Palace Museum, Taipei

(Centre right) A Song Dynasty river ship (or "tower" ship) with a Xuanfeng traction catapult on its top deck.
© Hohum / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom right) This Song Dynasty scroll, created by the court painter Chen Juzhong, carries a painting of a man leading a horse and a marginal inscription.
© National Palace Museum, Taipei

China allowed for population growth and the rapid development of great cities such as the capital of Kaifeng, which Marco Polo described as "the finest and most splendid city in the world."

Foreign relations

Despite its tremendous successes across so many sectors, the Song Dynasty maintained volatile, and often hostile, relations with its neighbors in the frontiers. In the northern regions, the *Khitan* people had established a power base in Manchuria since the fifth century. Yelu Abaoji established the Liao Dynasty, which put northern Manchuria and most of Mongolia under Khitan control by the year 907.

To the west of the Khitan were the *Tanguts* who are believed to be related to the Xianbei and Tibetan peoples. Their territory in the Ordos region since the ninth century comprised ideal grazing grounds for quality horses. This was where Western trade routes could be controlled. The Tanguts' relations

This Northern Song Dynasty gilded crown, dated between the tenth and eleventh century, was presented as tribute to a Khitan envoy of the Liao Dynasty.
© Saint Louis Art Museum

with China began during the previous dynasty, the Tang, who had crowned their chief, Tuoba Sigong, as their king in 884. Sigong had aided the Tang in suppressing a rebellion, and although the Tanguts had become independent from China at the end of the Tang, they remained on initially good terms with the Song.

China's relations with the Tanguts deteriorated when the latter entered a period of civil war. The Song Dynasty, always lacking good cavalry mounts, could not resist intervening given the

The wooden remains of a saddle that dates from the Liao Dynasty.
© Gary Todd / Wikimedia Commons

prospect of horses and desirable territory. This interventionism only resulted in the Tanguts uniting against them. By 1040, Zhao Yuanhao declared himself emperor over the Tanguts and declared the state of *Western (Xi) Xia* as the Song Dynasty's equal. He provoked war with the Chinese who claimed victory in 1044 despite devastating losses. Accordingly, the Tanguts received substantial gifts in exchange for peace and a nominal status as vassals to the Song.

The Song pursued a policy of pacification with both their neighbors between 1004 and 1044, sending significant annual payments to buy peace. Such a policy was similar to the one undertaken by the Han Dynasty over one thousand years earlier until the Martial Emperor Wu decided to wage war against the Xiongnu Huns. This constant looming threat from the Khitan's Liao and the Tangut's Western Xia stimulated the development and advancement of military technology. This allowed the Song to be the first civilization to utilize gunpowder in warfare and experiment with its various applications. Out of the Song Dynasty came the first varieties of bombs, continuous flamethrowers, rockets and gunpowder arrows, as well as fire lances, which were the ancestors to metal-barreled firearms that fired projectiles.

Interestingly, both the Liao and the Western Xia had adopted Sinification to a limited degree, applying Chinese methods of governance and employing Chinese officials to rule over a mixed population. East of the Khitans, in the Manchurian mountains, yet another ethnic group of pastoral-agrarian tribes known as the *Jurchens*, united into a confederation by the year 1115. Under the leadership of Aguda of the Wanyan clan, their dynasty became known as the Jin. The Jurchen people underwent rapid Sinification by adopting Chinese institutions and cultural norms. Ultimately, the Jurchen accepted Chinese civilization into their own, wearing Chinese clothing, adopted Chinese style surnames and Chinese rituals, studied Confucian classics, and intermarried with the local Chinese.

The fragile peace between the competing states led to repeated conflicts between the Song and the Tanguts after 1070. This paved the way for the Jurchens to expand their Jin Dynasty and set their sights directly as their rivals, the Khitan. Meanwhile, the Tanguts had allied with the Khitans in hopes of resisting both the Jurchens and the Song. In the Jurchens, the Song Chinese believed they had newfound allies against the Khitan in 1119, and even made arrangements to divide up the conquered Liao territories that once belonged to China. Ultimately, the Jurchens managed to destroy the Liao Dynasty of the Khitans in 1125. That same year, however, the Jurchens *betrayed* the Song and besieged to the capital of Kaifeng (known as Bianjing under the Jurchens) twice, ultimately bringing its fall in 1127. The fall of the city marked the end of what is called the Northern Song Dynasty.

(Top) A handscroll dated to the thirteenth century showing horses and figures wearing typical Khitan costumes.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

(Bottom) Map showing the expanse of the Song Dynasty and its neighboring enemies.
© Richard Thomson

A Liao-Dynasty pair of boots with an embroidered scene of two phoenixes in flight . They were probably an imperial commission, most likely for a woman.
© The Cleveland Museum of Art

Eager to gain access to the wealth of the Song, the Jurchens pushed further south deeper into Chinese territory, overwhelming Song forces and leaving some surviving isolated military units. It was not until the Song Navy blocked their attempts to cross the Yangzi River in the heart of China that the Jurchen incursions were put to a halt. The Chinese were able to recover some of their lost territory in 1134-1135 through the leadership of a renowned and undefeated general named Yue Fei. Venerated today as a Chinese hero, he worked his way up from the lowest ranks to become the overall commander of the Song Dynasty army.

Ambitions to retake the capital of Kaifeng and reclaim northern China never came to fruition. Government officials desired to sue for peace with the Jurchens and convinced the new emperor to recall General Yue Fei to the capital. The emperor listened, fearing that the previous emperor, Qinzong, who was in Jurchen custody, would be released and reclaim the throne from him. General Yue Fei was therefore arrested and imprisoned on false charges, and later died, most probably having been executed by the government he served so faithfully. The loss of northern China to the Jurchen Jin Dynasty led to the Southern Song, a dynasty that paid humiliating tributes to the Jurchens in submission to the Jin as a "superior state". The Southern Song lasted until 1279 when it fell to the Mongols.

The rise of the Mongols

In 1162, under the shadow of the warring kingdoms and empires, a child was born

A Yuan-Dynasty bronze hand cannon dated to 1332. The preceeding Song Dynasty had been a time of great innovation in the realm of gunpowder-based weapons.
© BabelStone / Wikimedia Commons

Military innovations

The Song Dynasty marked the earliest instance in which gunpowder was deployed in warfare. Apart from pyrotechnics, a variety of bombs and firearms was developed. In turn, the Tangut, Khitan, Jurchen, and later, the Mongols, all adopted such technologies, usually by way of captive Chinese engineers and gunners.

Most of what is known about gunpowder technology from that period comes from a military manual known as the *Wujing Zongyao* (Essentials of the Military Arts) from 1044. Fire lances were polearms with attached tubes of bamboo (or reinforced paper material in the case of the Jin), filled with gunpowder. They erupted like a firework, spewing iron fragments or porcelain like a shotgun. Such weapons were some of the earliest forms of firearms prior to the adoption of metal barrels late in the thirteenth century.

The earliest types of primitive "eruptor" cannon with metal barrels came later in the dynasty. One such example is the *flying-cloud thunderclap eruptor*, which fired gunpowder bombs encased in cast-iron shells that could explode on impact. Such an eruptor was usually mounted on a wooden frame and is regarded as the direct ancestor of the cannon, which would see more widespread use by the succeeding Mongol Yuan Dynasty. It is not certain, however, if such hardware was used in the defense against the siege of Kaifeng in 1232, where bombs hurled by catapults were confirmed to be present in the field.

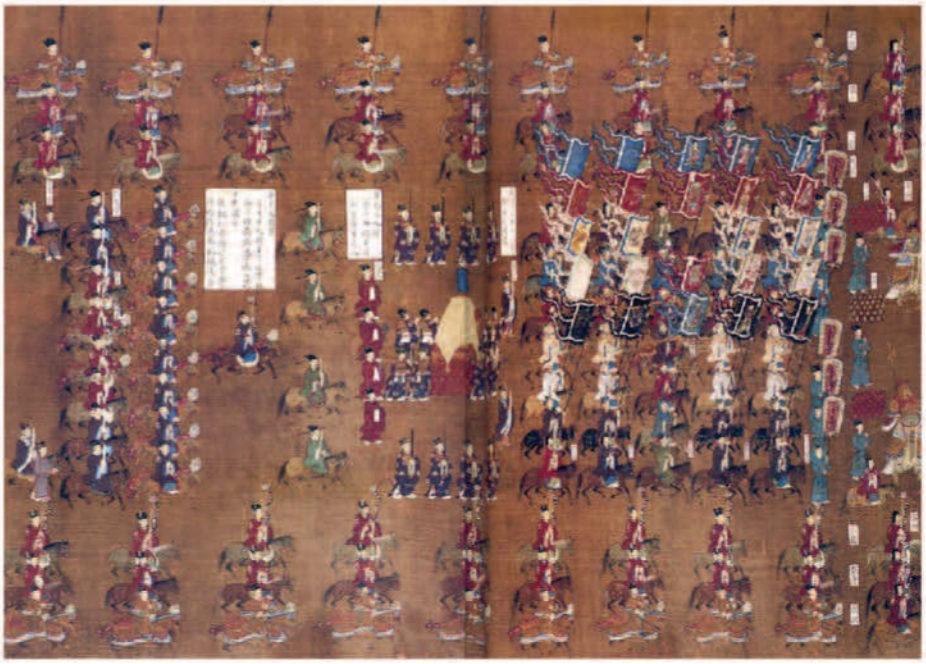
The "fierce-fire oil cabinet" was the world's first true continuous flame thrower, activated by pumping a handle on double-action piston bellows, spewing a stream of kerosene from the barrel where the fuel was ignited. This weapon was used in naval warfare.

Bombs were perhaps the most varied type of gunpowder weapon. Incendiary explosives, gunpowder grenades, poison gas bombs, smoke bombs, and the use of iron, rock, or ceramic for shrapnel were mass produced. Iron-shelled bombs the size and shape of gourds, were more than capable of shattering city walls. Such bombs were even installed on ships to be launched by way of trebuchets.

Rockets, known as fire arrows, were also introduced. These projectiles utilized gunpowder charges that propelled arrows further and faster to detonate in a fiery display. Soon, tubes and wooden frames allowed for the launching of multiple arrows. These too were installed on ships to help set enemy ships aflame. Portable versions of the launcher even allowed soldiers to fire multiple rocket arrows while cradling the launcher in their arms.

© Public domain

A scroll showing a battle fought during the first Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274. A shell filled with gunpowder can be seen exploding in the center of the composition. While this painting dates to ca. 1293, the explosion was likely added at a later date. This, nonetheless, reflects the fact that the Mongols brought new gunpowder technology with them during the attempted invasion.



(Top) A section of *The Imperial Procession Map*, which is a Northern Song Dynasty painting from the mid-eleventh century that depicts the emperor's journey to Qingcheng Mountain to offer sacrifices to Heaven and Earth.

(Bottom) Remains of Diaoyucheng Fortress, located in the Hechuan District of China.

clutching a blood clot in his right hand. To the nomadic Mongol tribes, it was a sign from the heavens that the child was to be a great warrior. His name was Temujin. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, it was through tremendous trials that he forged important alliances and settled feuds between clans that allowed him to make his impressive ascension to power. He was Chinggis Khan, the "khagan" (supreme leader) of all the tribes of the Mongol nation. Under his leadership, he turned the simple nomads who fought in hordes into a near unstoppable and disciplined war machine. The result was the creation of the largest land empire in world history.

It was not long until the Jurchens themselves were confronted with an enemy to their north who threatened to invade them the way they had done to the Song. Chinggis Khan first attacked the Tangut Western Xia in 1209 and "secured their submission along with a bride for the khagan." Chinggis Khan then set his sights on the Jin Dynasty, which he mercilessly attacked and pillaged with large scale attacks in 1205 and 1209 before an all-out invasion by 1211.

The Jurchens issued warnings to the Song Dynasty saying that the Mongols would come for them next if they did not come to a truce and work together. Such warnings were ignored and instead the Song allied with the Mongols to help them conquer the Jin. Chinggis Khan died in the year 1227. Between 1232 and 1233, the city of Kaifeng was once again besieged with the Jurchens on the defensive. The siege was noted for the extensive use of gunpowder weapons such as powerful spherical cast-iron "thunder crash bombs," which could be launched by catapults.

The Mongols, however, seemed to have utilized their own gunpowder weapons at the Jin defenders. Despite these advanced armaments, the Mongols cut off the city's supplies in an attempt to starve them out. Additionally, the Song Chinese allied with the Mongols for the opportunity to strike back against their longtime Jurchen rivals and arrived with some 20,000 men. In the end, the starved and diseased Jurchen defenders were overrun and defeated with casualties numbering in the thousands.

By 1234, northern China was under Mongol control with the Jin Dynasty completely conquered and assimilated into the Mongol camp. True to the warnings of the Jurchens, the Mongols set their sights on the Southern Song Dynasty. It took four decades, but by 1279 the Mongols had eliminated the very last of the resistance from Song loyalists "in a naval battle off the coast of Guangdong during which the last of the Song princes died." **MW**

Clay Vagrant is an independent scholar and lover of world history. He graduated with his ALM in History from Harvard University in 2024. He also writes historical fantasy novels in a series titled "War of the Dragon Throne".

This eleventh-century porcelain vessel has brown glaze intended to mimic a leather wrapper. It may have been commissioned by a Khitan or Jurchen patron.

In the church sacristy, a bishop is getting ready for the celebration of Mass, including the combing of his hair. Combing was about ordering the mind as you order your hair, taming unwieldy or inappropriate thoughts, imposing systems of order — it was a series of behaviours about transition, a way of accessing another reality.

The use of combs in medieval worship

LITURGICAL OR KNOT?

Charlotte Wood

On the surface, medieval combs might not sound like the most compelling of topics. But as is usually the case with every day, innocuous objects, combs can reveal various ways of understanding the medieval worldview that are not typically recorded in manuscripts or written in kings' decrees.

Not just tools used to smooth unruly strands, combs were powerful symbols of intimacy, used in a range of ritualized ways across the medieval period. From the fifth to the fifteenth century, the functions and symbolisms of combs have resulted in an entangled web of meaning that is worth unknotting.

What is liturgical?

Broadly speaking, a liturgical object is one that is in use during or adjacent to the liturgy. This is the form of worship used in the Catholic church, and includes all the rites, the ceremonies, prayers and the sacraments of the Church, and is different from other forms of worship, such as private prayer. Medieval liturgical practices were dynamic and multisensory; the singing of hymns, set movements and readings of scriptures were all set against a visually intricate backdrop of painted church walls, carved choir screens, and beautifully carved stonework. How can combs be considered liturgical? Since the nineteenth century, carved ivory combs with religious imagery have been described as liturgical combs. These are often large, made from luxurious materials like elephant or walrus ivory, sometimes polychromatic or brightly coloured. However, the title of 'liturgical comb' could flatten the many ways in which combs were used in the medieval period.

Dated to the second half of the ninth century, this comb of St. Heribert shows an ornate rendition of the Crucifixion of Christ.
© Daderot / Wikimedia Commons

Cleanliness

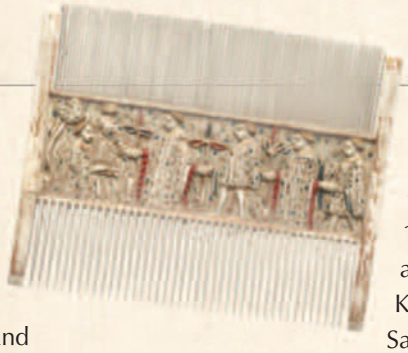
Keeping hair lice- and nit-free was an important part of health during the Middle Ages. For women, including nuns who lived in religious communities, hair would have been veiled or covered, sometimes with multiple strips of material that were draped almost to appear hair-like. The hair underneath these coverings would still have had to be brushed and tied up. It would have taken time to comb hair. This would have been an activity that occurred away from most people. Revealing hair normally covered was reserved or restricted for certain people, such as maids or in the case of married women, a spouse.

For men, even though the tonsure was an important part of monastic life, there still would have been a remaining band of hair that needed to be combed and kept neat. Later monastic manuscripts reveal that hair was combed at set times. Lanfranc's *Monastic Constitutions* (ca. 1070) related when novices ought to keep their hair tidy: if children woke up before the abbot, they were roused quietly, then they washed and combed their hair before heading to the schoolroom. For the instruction of novices, they too were told to comb their hair and wash their hands when returning to the dormitory before Terce. In York, according to the Ordinal and Customary of St Mary's Abbey (1398–1405), hair combing and hand washing took place during a period of reflection in the dormitory before lunch.

Hair was said to be combed again at the end of the day, once more after washing hands, and just before a period of silent reflection. While the functional aspect of this was clearly to keep people clean and their appearance neat, there is also a spiritual element. Combs were being associated with meditation, reflection, and intimacy.

Gifts

Around 794, the Archbishop Riculf of Mainz, a city on the Rhine in now-Germany, sent his friend Alcuin of York an ivory comb. Alcuin was in his sixties at that time, and had developed a reputation as a preeminent scholar, being the Master of Charlemagne's Palace School at Aachen in 782. He taught the emperor himself, as well as his sons Pepin and Louis. Alcuin was thrilled by the gift, and wrote two responses to Riculf, one being a prose letter, and the other in verse. These responses showcase the typically



An ivory comb of ca. 1420 with painted scenes of courtly life, including dancing couples and hunters.
© The Walters Art Museum

'Anglo-Saxon riddle mentality' that transforms an object into an animate being — here, the comb is likened to a formidable creature, a 'wonderful animal with two heads and sixty teeth.' The comb's function is alluded to — in the riddle Alcuin writes that it 'devoured with its teeth neither fruit nor tipplers' wines, / yet it didn't waste away with its open mouth,' suggesting the 'jaws' of the comb were kept busy ensnaring lice.

Beyond its practical use, the comb had an important meaning. Alcuin was thrilled with the gift, so much so that he wrote of his cherished affection of 'the sender, which I have always found utterly reliable.' Alcuin's comb was not just a practical object a friend thought he might need. It was part of the relationship the two men shared, acting as a reminder of this as their careers took them in different geographical directions.

Most hair combing took place in the bedroom, during times of transition in the day — before a meal or before bed. Alcuin likely would have used these times to reflect, as later monastic handbooks suggest. And so Riculf was inserting himself into these intimate moments, reminding Alcuin of him at a particularly private time.

Relics

According to the *Life of Alcuin*, the ninth-century account of his life and death, Alcuin's comb remained close to him in his life, hanging above his bed, underlining the intimate nature of this object. In the aftermath of his death, however, Alcuin's comb developed new associations and was a point of connection for new networks of relationships.

The *Life of Alcuin* contains two stories where the comb heals people close to Alcuin. The first is where his pupil, Sigulfus, is preparing Alcuin's body for death. During these difficult moments, Sigulfus has a great headache, one which is healed when he uses the comb himself to brush his own hair. A second pupil then is encouraged by Sigulfus to use the comb to cure his toothache — Eangist touches his tooth with the comb and is miraculously healed.

One of the most famous medieval combs found in England also could be considered a relic — the comb of Saint Cuthbert (d. 687), which was buried with him. It is also made from elephant ivory like Alcuin's, and is also double sided, with both wide and narrow teeth. There is a hole in the central panel that is unusual — no other comb looks like this. However, this was likely included to make holding the object easier because of its size — Cuthbert's comb is 12cm wide.

An early-thirteenth-century double-sided ivory comb with scenes from the life of Saint Thomas Becket.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Although a comb was not a common relic, other examples exist. In addition to Alcuin and Cuthbert, a comb allegedly belonging to Saint Thomas Becket was listed in the 1432 Inventory of Glasgow Cathedral alongside a comb associated with Saint Kentigern, and two combs associated with Saint Remacle (from the ninth and tenth centuries) were found in Stavelot, Belgium. It is because of their quotidian function that combs became meaningful. These were objects that were closely associated with a single person. Combs were used on the body, being owned by an individual for a significant period of time. Such objects are known as contact relics, and while there are not many instances of comb relics, there are other instances where saints or important figures have personal objects like cups imbued with this added spiritual meaning.

Display

Some combs were likely not used to brush hair at all, and instead intended to be displayed. A large ivory ninth-century comb at the V&A Museum originally found in the cathedral treasury at Pavia, is one example of how combs may have been used as decorative objects. The comb has two small holes in the top end plates and is large (21.2 x 10.6cm). It would have been unwieldy to use by oneself. The decorative central panel on one side depicts Sagittarius firing an arrow at Capricorn, and on the other the tree of life.

Because of the design of the comb, which suggests an association with an event that took place in December and the design and style of the comb itself, this object has been associated with the coronation of Charles the Bald (whose nickname is likely an intentional misnomer, and he did have hair), which took place on 25 December 875. Charles was crowned as Emperor in Saint Peter's in Rome. He visited Pavia before and after the coronation, and this comb was originally part of the treasury there, further cementing the idea that it was given to the cathedral at some point around his coronation. It possibly served as a commemorative object or an indication of the relationship between Charles and the cathedral there — another instance of a comb acting as a proxy in a relationship. The coloured glass, gold paint, and the dynamic ivory carving would have reflected the candlelight or sunlight, leaving a strong visual impression.

Pilgrim badges

Pilgrim badges, as souvenirs or mementos of pilgrimages, became popular especially in the later medieval period, and a sprinkling of badges have a comb on them. Such examples have been unearthed across England, from Norfolk to Northamptonshire. Badges depicting combs are associated with Saint Blaise, who had a shrine in Canterbury Cathedral. He was the patron saint of wool-combers and associated with the wool trade, as well traditionally being thought to help with problems associated with the throat (especially in relation to stuck fish hooks).

His association with combs was a result of the method of his martyrdom in the fourth century. Blaise was tortured with metal combs, which were heated and scraped over his skin

in a particularly gruesome manner. Although related to wool combs, which are different from hair combs, many of these badges depict the standard late medieval double sided hair comb, suggesting that there was fluidity in the symbolism.

Beyond Saint Blaise, one special comb now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (1988.279), might also have been a memento of some kind of pilgrimage. Made ca. 1200, the comb is carved from ivory and depicts scenes between Henry II and Thomas Becket. One side shows Becket as archbishop of Canterbury, the other, his murder. Becket's cult sprung up relatively quickly in the aftermath of his death, with pilgrims travelling to Canterbury in large numbers. Perhaps this comb was an extremely luxurious memento of such a journey.

Other ivory combs associated with Becket have survived. The aforementioned Becket comb at Glasgow is one, and in 1319 Margery Crioll of Irchester (North Northamptonshire) left her daughter an ivory comb that was described as having belonged to Saint Thomas of Canterbury. Although these objects might have been said to have belonged to the saint himself, the fact that there are several instances of similarly described combs and a physical surviving example, suggests that there was a market for combs that used commemorative imagery for a particular saint or event.

A mid-sixteenth-century ivory comb, probably from Flanders, with scenes from the story of Joseph.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Vesting

While combs have been found or present in various religious contexts — as gifts between religious elites or as mementos of a particularly moving pilgrimage experience — these contexts were still not necessarily 'liturgical'. The most obvious way combs were used in direct relation to the liturgy was in vesting prayers. Vesting prayers were part of the dressing process for the priest, where the man was dressed as prayers were said over the ceremonial vestments.

The development of the vesting process is difficult to track, and we have to understand that by the time practices were recorded, it is highly likely that a lot of these actions had already been established in practice. Ideas about the liturgy had long life spans, and so when we find a reference to a comb in relation to a vesting prayer, it is highly likely that this instance was the first time such behaviour had been recorded — but not the first time it took place.

Written by three scribes and dated to ca. 972–986, the *Sacramentary of Ratoldus* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 12052) is a mix between a pontifical and a sacramentary. The manuscript draws on a wide range of sources, from Canterbury to Saint-Denis in France. It is large, 277 folios, but the only reference to a comb is found in a single specific vesting prayer for a bishop, preparing to say Mass on Easter Sunday. The vesting prayer that involves a comb exists only in this specific manuscript. In the account, water is brought to the hands with a comb and a cap, and all are blessed. Ratoldus is the first instance of a comb in a vesting prayer, but when combs emerge in later medieval manuscripts like the Westminster and Canterbury Consuetudinary's (1259–1283), they turn up in the same place. For these works, the abbot must comb himself before an important mass, a process that takes place in the vestry.

A tenth-century ivory comb from the Abbey of Saint-Remacle in Stavelot.
© Daderot / Wikimedia Commons

An ivory comb of ca. 1130 with scenes from the infancy and Passion of Christ carved all around.
© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

A distinction, however, is made between a vesting *object* and a *process* that is part of the liturgical preparations. In the most commonly-cited source for combs in relation to the liturgy, William Durand writes about the importance of hair combing in book four, about the actions of the mass, rather than book three, on vesting. Vesting garments and preparational gestures are separated by Durand, though the hair was expected to be combed before the Mass, like dressing. Durand's work, the *Rational divinorum officiorum* (1291–1296) was intended to uncover the inner meaning of the liturgy for the education of the clergy. For Durand, combing the hair was part of a process that brought people into the correct headspace to say Mass.

Conclusion

Later evidence suggests that combs were used in the consecration rite of bishops. However, there were many wider uses of medieval combs that related to worship but were not strictly liturgical. By the thirteenth century, the liturgical use of combs as part of the vesting prayers was well-established, even if the combs were never described as explicitly liturgical objects by the scribes. The consistency of their appearance in vesting prayers indicates that they were, even if sparsely mentioned, a part of such rituals for at least five hundred years, from the first, tenth-century, recording.

This, however, is only one way they were used. Inclusion in church treasuries, associations with saints and the appearance on pilgrim badges, as well as the existence as relics or gifts between powerful individuals show that medieval combs could be potent objects. While it is accurate to describe some medieval combs as 'liturgical', this label is only one way to express the many meanings and functions of combs in the Middle Ages. **MW**

Charlotte Wood is currently finishing her PhD in medieval history at Oxford University, where she is an Oxford-Anderson scholar. Her research focuses on combs in England, ca. 400–1400, specifically in relation to ritualized behaviors.

Artisans in the Middle Ages

Alice Isabella Sullivan

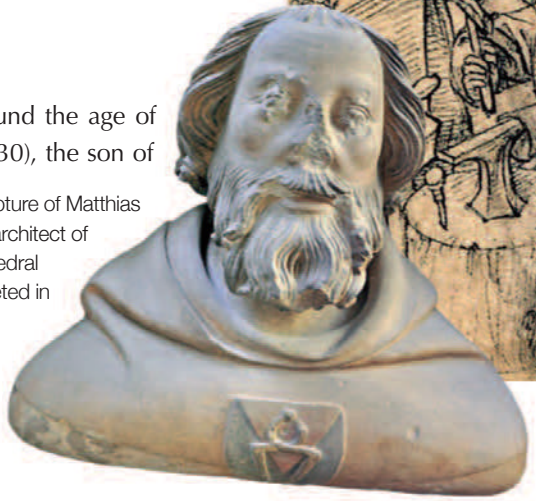
CRAFTING A REPUTATION

Today, we know little about individual artists from the Middle Ages. Surviving artworks offer insight into their practices and techniques, sometimes even their training. Textual sources can also be informative. Manuals, inscriptions, and contracts reveal aspects of the activities and identities of medieval artists. Although artistic individuality was rarely acknowledged, excellence in a given craft could be promoted in other ways.

The distinction between arts and crafts, and by extension 'artist' and 'artisan', is modern. During the Middle Ages, painters, sculptors, and craftsmen were usually labeled as artisans. To pursue such a career, they would have demonstrated some artistic skills from a young age, further learning their trade through practical and rigorous apprenticeships. These experiences often placed emphasis on formal training over individual artistic expression.

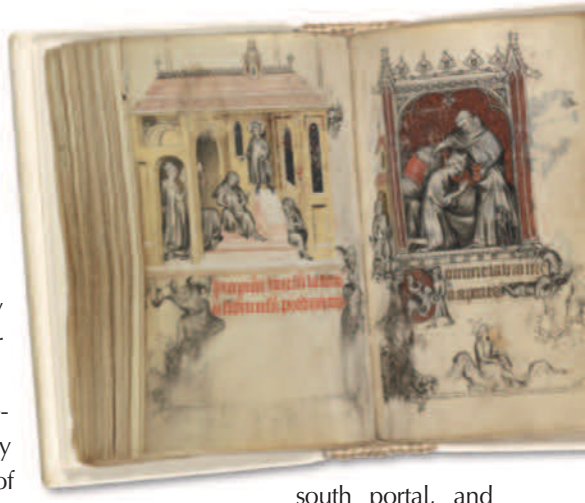
Training and experience

Most artists began their training at a young age, usually around the age of 10, but some were even younger. Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530), the son of a tailor, was only seven years old when he was apprenticed to a goldsmith. Long-term apprenticeships with a master craftsman offered young artists opportunities to learn how to paint, sculpt, or create manuscripts, among other specialties.



A sandstone sculpture of Matthias of Arras, the first architect of the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, completed in the 1370s.

The *House Book* (Hausbuch) of Wolfegg Castle was created ca. 1480 by several artists and scribes. This drawing (fol. 16r) shows Mercury and 'his children' representing various trades and arts, such as painting and smithing.



A spread from *The Hours of Queen Jeanne d'Evreux of France*, created by Jean Pucelle. The scene on the left shows Jeanne at the tomb of Saint Louis whom she claimed was her ancestor.

Others learned in monastic workshops and *scriptoria*. The Dominican friar Fra Angelico (ca. 1395–1455) initially trained as a manuscript illuminator before turning to monumental painting.

Based on surviving formal agreements between the apprentice's family and the master craftsman, the training of novices typically lasted between three and ten years. In medieval Padua, the minimum apprenticeship was three years, for example. The young apprentices usually worked and lived with the master, becoming members of his extended households.

During the initial training years, artists assisted with basic tasks, such as preparing pigments and panels. Over time, their training expanded to more complex activities, including drawing, copying established designs, assisting in large projects, and eventually producing independent work under supervision. Once their training was concluded, they could take on independent and collaborative projects.

This steel padlock and key made by the German André Omereler in 1531 may have been a guild showpiece or even a masterpiece.

Collaborations might be in the context of major artistic projects requiring teams of specialists working together over many years. The great Gothic cathedrals, for example, were built over several generations and involved master architects, masons, stone carvers, painters, glass makers, and many other skilled professionals. St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague was begun under the French architect Matthias of Arras (1344–1352), continued under the German architect and artist Peter Parler (1356–1399), and then under the guidance of his sons, Wenzel and Johannes Parler. Besides the distinctive Gothic architectural features, the cathedral features large and colorful stained-glass windows, a renowned collection of sculpted portraits in the triforium section, a Byzantine-inspired mosaic above the south portal, and many other decorations in different media. Obviously such a project would have involved artists from Prague and neighboring regions.

In order to coordinate the specifics of large commissions, artists and architects used pattern books and model drawings to ensure stylistic continuity, as well as to transfer ideas and motifs across media and from one place to another.

Architects also used drawings to sketch out the design features of individual sections of buildings and ensure that overall ratios were maintained throughout the structure. Artists followed established iconographic conventions to ensure that scenes and figures were easily recognizable. Although few in number, surviving working drawings reveal how artists executed their creations in different media, employing similar patterns for icon painting and embroideries, for instance. Originality was not the primary goal; instead, accuracy, consistency, and adherence to traditional forms took center stage.

Professional associations

By the eleventh century, many artists across Europe belonged to guilds. These professional associations served as a crucial stage in the professional development of artists. They regulated training, production, and commercial practices for artists. Whereas guild membership offered protection and status, it also imposed strict rules, setting standards for quality, regulating prices, overseeing the apprenticeship system, and even controlling who could practice a craft in a given town.

After spending many years in training, artists could become 'masters', usually after demonstrating sufficient skill by completing a "masterpiece." Once an artist

Manuals

Besides practical hands-on training through observation and repetition, artists used manuals to guide their practice. *On Divers Arts* (*De diversis artibus*) by the Benedictine monk Theophilus Presbyter (ca. 1070–1125) is one of the earliest surviving manuals (or treatise) on artistic crafts. It details specific techniques in painting using pigments and gold leaf; glassmaking either by blowing or work in stained glass; and metalwork like goldsmithing and enameling. The manual is written from a practitioner's perspective, making it a crucial text for understanding aspects of medieval art, technology, and the training of artists.

A sheet from a medieval model book. Dated to ca. 1380, books like this one were used in the instruction of young apprentices.

Medieval artists were not uniformly literate, but by the later Middle Ages most artists that garnered some fame had an education. The Italian painter Cennino d'Andrea Cennini (ca. 1360–ca. 1427) even wrote a book, *Il libro dell'arte*, which offered a how-to guide for painters, including information on pigments, brushes, and different painting techniques. In this source, Cennini outlines that drawing and coloring "are the foundation of all the arts, and of all the labrours of the hand." Only educated and highly trained artists could create such treatises to further their craft and, in turn, teach others. He also promoted a thirteen-year period of training, which was considerably longer than usual.

earned this title, they would take on 'journeyman' status and could run workshops of their own, taking on apprentices and receiving art commissions from patrons.

The Church, rulers, noblemen, guilds, and urban governments were among the major patrons of art. Contracts usually specified the details of the commission, who was involved, and the payment. Sometimes, the textual sources also reveal disputes over the quality of the project or delays in its completion.

Patronage ensured financial stability for medieval artists. Successful masters in major cities could achieve comfortable livelihoods and own property, while others struggled with irregular work and competition. Travel was often necessary, especially for artists seeking large commissions or specialized training. We have the names of certain artists who were summed to work on specific projects. A certain George from Trikkala, Greece, was called to work at the Moldavian court during the second half of the fifteenth century. His work was so valued at the court that, upon his death, he was honored with burial in a local church. The movements of such artists contributed to the spread of artistic ideas, styles, and techniques across regions.

Identity issues

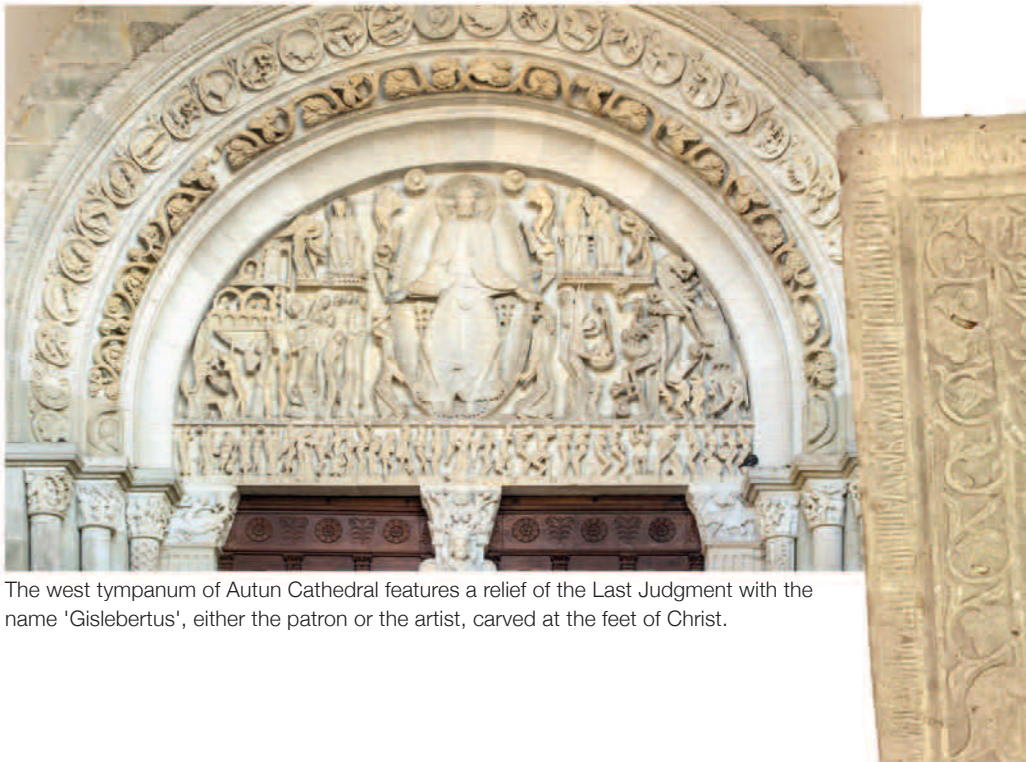
Many artists remain anonymous to us today. Their identities were closely tied to their crafts and guilds, rather than to individual fame. Artists may also have refrained from signing their works either out of social expectations or religious humility. As a result, the names of countless skilled artists have been lost to history.

Even when inscriptions are present on an artwork, the name does not always make clear whether it refers to the artist who worked on the project,or the patron who funded the work, or the theologian who guided the iconographic selections. This is the case, for example, with the name 'Gislebertus', carved at the feet of Christ on the Last Judgment tympanum at Autun Cathedral. Scholars have long identified 'Gislebertus' as the lead sculptor of the impressive carvings at Autun, but he could have also been the patron who paid for the project and requested for his name to be carved in perpetuity, and in humility, in the sculptural program.

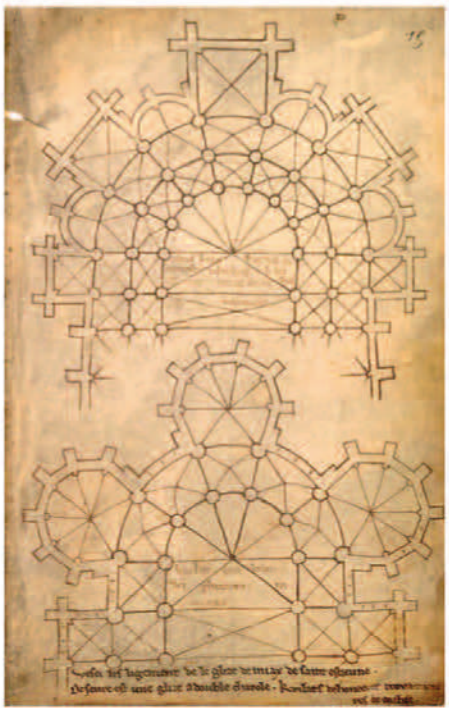
A silver medal of the Silversmiths Guild of Antwerp, dated to 1597.

Lengthier inscriptions, like those often found in manuscripts and some-

A fifteenth-century engraving showing an artisan and his young apprentice nearby.



The west tympanum of Autun Cathedral features a relief of the Last Judgment with the name 'Gislebertus', either the patron or the artist, carved at the feet of Christ.



© BnF, MS Fr. 19093, fol. 15r

A page with architectural drawings of church apses from Villard de Honnecour's album of drawings and sketches, dated to the thirteenth century.

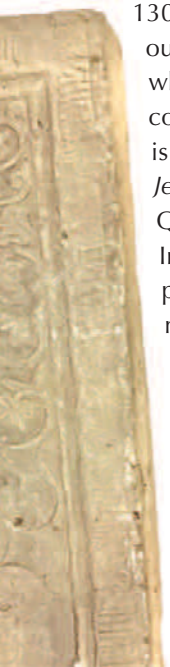
© BnF, MS Fr 9140, fol. 361v

Detail from the *Book of the Properties of Things* by Bartholomew the Englishman, dated to ca. 1480, showing a man painting.

© Tistudio / Shutterstock

The west façade of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague with the St. Adalbert Gate and St. Wenceslaus Gate.

times on icons, clearly identify the names of artists, scribes, and illuminators. Wills may also mention the work of noteworthy artists. Jean Pucelle (ca. 1300–1355), for example, was an outstanding Gothic-era illuminator who worked at the Parisian royal court. A famous work by his hand is the prayer book *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, executed for the Queen of France (ca. 1324–1328). In her will, the queen left this prayer book "that Pucelle illuminated" to King Charles V.



The grave stone of a certain Master George from Trikkala, Greece, who was active at the Moldavian court and honored with burial in a local church upon his death in 1530.

© Neoclassicism Enthusiast / Wikimedia Commons

Despite the prevalent anonymity, artists took pride in their work. Marginal notes in manuscripts, subtle self-portraits, or distinctive stylistic traits sometimes reveal a desire for some kind of recognition. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, initially in Italy, attitudes began to shift, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the Renaissance artist as an individual, creative genius.

Conclusion

Artists' activities were labor-intensive, collaborative, and at times dangerous (think of toxic pigments or sharp tools). No surprise that some manuscripts feature remarks like: "This work is written, master give me a drink; let the right hand of the scribe be free from the oppressiveness of pain."

Though often anonymous and constrained by conventions and resources, medieval artists left us many wonderful works, intended to educate, inspire, and delight their patrons and audiences. **MW**

***Alice Isabella Sullivan, PhD, is an art historian and editor of* Medieval World.**

Bede of Monkwearmouth writing at his desk in the guise of an Evangelist. This portrait is from the *Prose Life of St. Cuthbert*, dated to the late twelfth century.

Time, models, and sources

WRITING HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

James G. Clark

In the Middle Ages, history was a way to understand one's place in the world and relationship to power, both earthly and divine. History was not just a record of facts, but part of a more meaningful story connected to religion, politics, and daily life.

At the heart of medieval history writing was the Christian conviction that people were passing through an age pre-ordained in God's plan for His creation, between the age of pagan ignorance that prevailed in antiquity, before the coming of Christ, and the last age that would begin with his return, when God and His people would know eternal harmony.

Learning the histories

Church worship reinforced this chronology, retracing the divine plan for the world through the course of the year from Advent to Easter and beyond. An annual cycle of readings from the Old and New Testament impressed on people ideas of a pre-history — from Adam to Moses to King David — and of the origins of their own Christian age in the Acts of the Apostles. The prospects for the future were found in the Bible's final book of the Apocalypse or Revelation of St John. When Churchmen first came to study the Bible, they often called it 'learning the histories'.

It was essential for clergy to mark time through the words of worship and via the calendar, which recorded every fes-

A German ivory plaque of ca. 1500 that formed the top half of a folding portable sundial. Charting the passage of time was an important concern for the medieval Church.

This late-fourteenth-century map of the world, with Jerusalem at the centre, was created by the Benedictine monk Ranulf Higden (ca. 1280 – 1363).

tival and, typically, carried with it a ready reckoner to help them calculate special dates throughout the year.

The Churches' role in leading religious worship and sustaining the faith of the people was supported in society with sites and sources of income for the faithful. This institutional presence tied them to a temporal record of a different kind, the passage of property and rights from one generation to another. As Church and religion developed in medieval Europe, so too did the imperatives for thinking about, researching, and writing history.

Classical connections

Of course, even in the early Middle Ages, Latin-educated Churchmen knew they were not the first to recognise the value of history. The histories of classical antiquity presented a compelling template for the structure and style of a narrative about the past. The work of the earliest medieval historians, of the sixth through the ninth centuries, such as Gregory of Tours, Bede of Monkwearmouth, Paul the Deacon, Einhard, owed much to classical models, as much when their subject was the Church as when they wrote about kings and peoples.

Even the genre that is seen as distinctively medieval, the Universal Chronicle, which brought together parallel timelines of the Biblical, Classical, and Christian pasts, originated in the late-antique history of Eusebius of Caesarea.

Diverse writing

But the keynote of medieval historical writing is its diversity. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, Churchmen, women, and an increasing number of laypeople, made accounts of times past in annals, autobiography, biography, in epic narratives deservedly named 'Historia', and in bald lists of dates and matters of fact that barely can be called a chronicle at all. They wrote in poetic form as a well as prose, and not only in Latin but in all the native European languages that began to take hold.

This diverse historical writing reflected medieval society and its varied audiences, which were seeking religious devotion, moral teaching, political legitimacy, or local identity through the different writings of history.

This historical writing is comparatively well-preserved. Medieval historians were driven by impulses, to research and report, to commemorate, to celebrate, and to criticise, which later generations recognised and shared, notwithstanding their differences of religion.

When book collections were broken up and manuscripts replaced by print, there was an energetic effort to save many of these texts. Many histories that were transmitted in manuscript with illustrations have also been preserved, providing valuable evidence of how medieval people read, saw, and heard histories.

There is also quite a large body of historical writing in manuscripts that is yet to be examined in depth. History was a subject of interest to medieval writers and is a subject of research with fresh insights to offer future scholars. MW

James G. Clark is editor of* The Cambridge Companion to Matthew Paris *(Cambridge University Press, 2026).

Detail from *The Book of Queens*, dated ca. 1410, showing the writer Christine de Pizan handing her work to Louis I, Duke of Orléans.

Ezra writing in his scriptorium, as shown in the *Codex Amiatinus*, which is one of the oldest surviving Bible manuscripts, dating to ca. 692.

Interior view of the *scriptorium* at the former Cistercian Abbey of Fontenay. Monks would have spent many hours in this space, copying and illuminating manuscripts.

Robert Jones

Medieval descriptions of warfare

NOBLE DEEDS AND TROPES

Warfare took up a large part of the corpus of medieval writing, whether the reportage of chronicle or annal, the storytelling of epics and romance, or the reminiscences of biography or autobiography. How did writers construct their narratives, and what did they seek to convey to their audiences about the experience of battle?

The majority of the narrators and commentators of medieval history were men of the Church, living cloistered lives within abbeys or tied to churches and cathedrals. Those secular authors, like Froissart, were rarely men of war. Their experience of war, and interest in the subject, was limited if not non-existent. The events about which they wrote happened many miles away, perhaps on a different continent, and they were reliant for their information on second-hand accounts. These accounts could have been offered by a returning eyewitness, but more often by another piece of writing by another narrator with limited knowledge and experience of battle. This means that, even when a chronicler does more than record the bare fact that a particular king went to war and was victorious, detail is often sparse, the events become garbled in their recounting. Myth, hearsay, and propaganda get recounted as facts.

One of three ivory Byzantine casket plaques from the tenth or eleventh century with carvings representing Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land.

Often, the narrators are writing some time after the events took place. A chronicle might be put together by an author recording the events of a decade, fifty, or a hundred years' past, pieced together from earlier texts and oral traditions, or from the testimony of men reflecting on the deeds of their youth.

Classical and biblical tropes

With little first-hand knowledge of medieval battle, or the details of a particular engagement, the writers of medieval histories tended to fall back on tropes drawn from their reading. Their ecclesiastical and academic training meant that this was invariably biblical or classical. Thus, in their narratives, medieval battles begin to resemble the battles of the Old Testament or the writings of Roman authors such as Caesar, Sallust, or Vegetius. It was these descriptions of battle that were the main frames of reference for medieval writers, and so their descriptions of battle reflected the language of their written sources rather than of the writer's own day.

That they were also, more often than not writing in Latin, rather than their own native tongue, reinforced the use of classical terms. Many descriptions of medieval war are littered with classical military terminology; armies are described as *legiones*, the individual bodies of men form up in *acies* or wings, the shield wall of Norse or English armies might be described as *testudo* (the biographer of Alfred the Great, Asser, does exactly this). However, we should not for a moment assume that medieval armies were actually using these classical formations or that there was some continuity between the 'professional' and drilled armies of ancient Rome and the far more organically structured armies of the Middle Ages. The writers were simply drawing on the language they had at hand to describe something that they may have poorly understood.

Similarly, depictions of battle might draw heavily on the descriptions of battle from the Old Testament. These portrayals often emphasised slaughter, with the enemy of the righteous being killed in their thousands and tens of thousands. A similarly bloody image of battle came from contemporary 'fictional' literature: the epic or romance. The heroes of these chivalric stories would wade through their enemies, slaughtering them left and right, shield and armour proving useless before the strength of their lance and sword.

Such hyperbole ran counter to the realities of combat, particularly for the knightly classes who were, as Orderic Vitalis said of the combatants at the Battle of Brémule, protected by the fact that "they were all clad in mail, and spared each other on both sides, out of fear of God and fellowship in arms; they were more concerned to capture than kill the fugitives."

Sometimes the use of a classical or biblical trope was a deliberate choice rather than merely the result of a classical education or ignorance of the realities of war. The most famous of these is William of Poitiers' description of how, as he landed at Pevensey, Duke William of Normandy tripped and fell, alarming some of his men, who perceived it as a bad omen. But he quickly grasped two

Depiction of the Battle of Hattin, fought between the Ayyubids and the Crusader States in 1187 *(top)*, and the death of Raymond of Poitiers *(bottom)*. Illustrations in this late-fifteenth-century chronicle of the Crusades do not shy away from showing blood, gore, and mass slaughter.

A detail from the Bayeaux Tapestry depicting the Norman army arriving in England, where they landed at Pevensey in 1066. William of Poitiers chronicles that William fell when he disembarked, which was pereceived as a bad omen.

Chronicler Jean Froissart is shown before Gaston Phébus, Count of Foix, presenting a letter of introduction.

A miniature taken from the *Great Chronicles of France* depicting the Battle of Bremule.

handfuls of soil and shouted 'England is ours!' The anecdote was wholly lifted from the classical writer Suetonius, who tells how Caesar fell as he landed on the northern African coast at Adrumetium, but quipped, 'Africa, I have tight hold of you!' to assuage the fear of his men. By reusing elements of Caesar's life, Poitiers was not only reinforcing the connection between the two leaders, but also showing off his classical learning.

Exaggerations

Another aspect of the desire to use classical and biblical tropes as the basis for writing about medieval war is that writers would routinely exaggerate the numbers of combatants. This, in some part, stemmed from biblical descriptions of battle. The Book of Samuel in the Old Testament talks of Saul having "slain his thousands" and David having "slain his tens of thousands." Biblical armies, moreover, are routinely calculated in terms of millions of men. These numbers were not to be taken literally, but as an indication of great power.

The Battle of Bannockburn, 23-24 June 1314, was a major engagement in the First War of Scottish Independence. This depiction, in Volume II of the *Scotichronicon*, shows the Scots using a schiltron, a specific type of dense infantry formation.

Similarly, medieval writers may have been doing the same things, especially when they wished to aggrandise the victory of their own people. Exact numbers (even if our authors had access to them) were less important than giving an overall sense of the scale of a battle, or of the discrepancy in numbers between two forces. The battle of Towton fought in 1461 between the Lancastrian and Yorkist forces was probably "the biggest and bloodiest on English soil," as Gravett describes it, whether the numbers were the hundreds of thousands claimed by the chroniclers or the fifty to sixty thousand estimated by modern historians.

The counterpoint to this reporting of huge numbers of combatants was that, once enumerated, the majority became invisible. Of those 'thousands and tens of thousands' that a chronicler might describe forming an army, their focus centred on a few hundred and named fewer than a handful.

Given that both the authors (for the most part) and their audiences came from the chivalric elite, it was on the chivalric elite that their narratives focused. It was knights and nobles who made war, and it was knights and nobles whose deeds were worthy of description. Especially in the High Middle Ages, the role of the common soldier barely gets a mention. Even in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when commoner armies (the Flemish urban militias, the Scottish Schiltons, or the English archers) were able

The Battle of Munda (45 BC), as depicted in a late fifteenth-century edition of the *Romuleon*, a medieval chronicle covering the history of ancient Rome.

to score dramatic victories over their knightly betters, their actions were often a backdrop to the fate of the knights, or the result of the leadership of the nobility.

Their fate is also ignored, as if they simply disappear from the battlefield. Chroniclers will be quite specific about the number of nobles killed, enumerating how many counts, dukes, bannerets, and knights were slain, whilst being far more vague about, or completely ignoring, the number of commoners lost. The writers and their audience simply were not interested in the fate of the archers, militiamen, or levies who marched to war in the shadow of the *bellatores*, those whose position in society was predicated on war.

Serious war and chivalric play

When Froissart wrote his chronicles of the Hundred Years War, he did so "in order that honourable deeds and ventures accomplished by arms which took place in the wars between England and France, might be aptly documented and commended to lasting memory, so that courageous men might follow such examples to inspire them to good." As a result, his depiction of medieval war often becomes a series of vignettes of individual knights performing great deeds of chivalry.

In doing so, he (and others like him) blur the line between 'serious' war, and the chivalric play of tournament and *pas d'armes*. They depict knights in battle making brave boasts, challenging opponents, and performing deeds of knightly prowess, indistinguishable from those performed in the lists, heedless of the dangers, and hiding the cruelty and brutality of war, the burning of villages, the pillaging and murder of the population, and the devastation wrought by an army on the march.

We must be careful, however, before we dismiss all of these chivalric cameos as inventions or exaggerations. After all, knights were themselves avid consumers of tales about both historical and fictional heroes, and their actions and beliefs were upheld as exemplars of appropriate behaviour on the battlefield. Just as our narrators of battle were heavily influenced by the classical and biblical descriptions they read, so too were the knightly classes influenced by the chivalric tales and histories that were the common entertainment in noble courts.

Many men must have gone into battle with a vision of themselves as a new Gawain, Lancelot, or Roland, inspired to perform deeds of great virtue and risk based purely on the depiction of battle they learnt through the writings of authors with no greater experience of war than themselves. **MW**

Robert Jones is a Visiting Scholar in History at Franklin and Marshall College, PA, and Admissions Manager at Haberdashers' Monmouth School.

A single-handed iron sword that was found near the site of the 1461 Battle of Towton.

Detail from the *Roman de Gillion de Trazegnies* with the nobleman Gillion defeating king Hector and fighting with the Emir of Orbrie.

Detail from Jean Froissart's *Chroniques* showing English archers besieging La Rochelle. Such 'common' soldiers are often overlooked in medieval histories.

Matthew Paris' thirteenth-century *Chronica maiora I* covers world history with a particular emphasis on Britain. This page is part of the itinerary from London to Jerusalem.

James G. Clark

An enigmatic and innovative historian

MATTHEW PARIS

Matthew Paris (d. 1259) is one of only a handful of medieval writers of history whose work has been read and consulted ever since his lifetime. He stands with Bede of Monkwearmouth, author of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People *(d. 735), Einhard, biographer of Charlemagne (d. 840), and Jean Froissart (d. 1405), chronicler of the Hundred Years War, as an historian whose knowledge of the past and vision for how to present it to readers exerted a powerful influence both during the Middle Ages and long after.*

While Matthew has always shared their renown, he differs from them in one important respect: we know very little about him and the course of his life. Matthew was a Benedictine monk at the English abbey of St. Albans (Hertfordshire). It was an ancient monastery, originating before the Norman Conquest (1066), which claimed to be a royal foundation centred on the shrine holding the relics of the kingdom's legendary first Christian martyr, Alban. The community of monks was large; when Matthew joined it in the thirteenth century there were as many as one hundred monks. They already had a reputation as a cultural centre, and over the course of the twelfth century had estab-

This mid-fourteenth-century German ivory diptych features the Crucifixion of Christ on top and the Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket below.

lished a *scriptorium* producing books of theology and the Latin classics.

The abbey attracted scholars trained in the northern European schools that would soon become universities, several of whom served as its abbots. It was exactly the environment in which we might expect to see the emergence of an innovative author whose work would prove influential Europe-wide. Matthew Paris, however, does not appear to have been a part of the St. Albans intellectual elite.

Rather, he seems to have been the epitome of the monastic — and perhaps especially, the Benedictine — tradition of historical writing, taking to the study of the past both in documentary records and in verbal reportage as an expression of his own monastic vocation. He knew as a monk that he should not look for any personal recognition. Although he owned some of the observations he made in his narratives, he hardly ever identified himself by name. In this way, Matthew Paris was unlike the celebrated scholar, Bede, or the ambitious courtiers, Einhard and Froissart.

Cloister monk

What we know of Matthew is the little he recorded himself. He entered St. Albans in 1217. This was an unsettled moment for the monastery and for the kingdom of England as a whole, a year after the death of the reviled King John (r. 1199–1216), which had ended in a rebellion of his barons supported by an invasion of the son of the King of France. Matthew's outlook was formed in the face of febrile international, national, and regional politics. Over the next three decades, he tracked the struggles of John's young son, Henry III (r. 1216–1272) to recover the authority of the crown and the security and prosperity of the kingdom.

Matthew made no mention of his precise position in the monastic community and there is no other record to suggest that he ever held any formal office. We must assume that for much of his career he was what is often called a cloister monk, that is, a member of the community who fulfilled all the routine duties required under the rule and customs of the monastery. In fact, he shares this monk's eye view often in his narrative, framing even episodes in high politics with the feast-day they fell on in the liturgical calendar. The very first meetings of the English Parliament, for which his chronicle is one of the most valuable witnesses, he dated according to what offices were being sung in the choir at St. Albans at the time.

Royal favour

The most significant moments in his career, which he reported in more detail than any other were, firstly, his commission by King Henry himself to write an account of the reception of a sacred relic of the Holy Blood of Christ at Westminster Abbey in 1247; and secondly, his appointment, on behalf of the Norwegian King Haakon IV to travel to the Benedictine monastery at Nidarholm to advise on its reform according to the Benedictine rule.

What Matthew neglects to explain in his account of these episodes is why he was selected for either role. He was among the party of clergy, including royal family, courtiers, bishops, other clergy, and monks who watched the solemn procession of the Holy Blood into Westminster Abbey. This surely means he was already known to the king and the royal household for his capacity to keep a record of events. But when, where, and why he came to their attention is unclear. His selection for the

In 1247, Matthew Paris was invited to Westminster Abbey to witness the reception of a relic containing the blood of Jesus Christ, gifted to King Henry III by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Matthew painted a vivid picture of the procession and wrote a first-hand report of this remarkable moment.

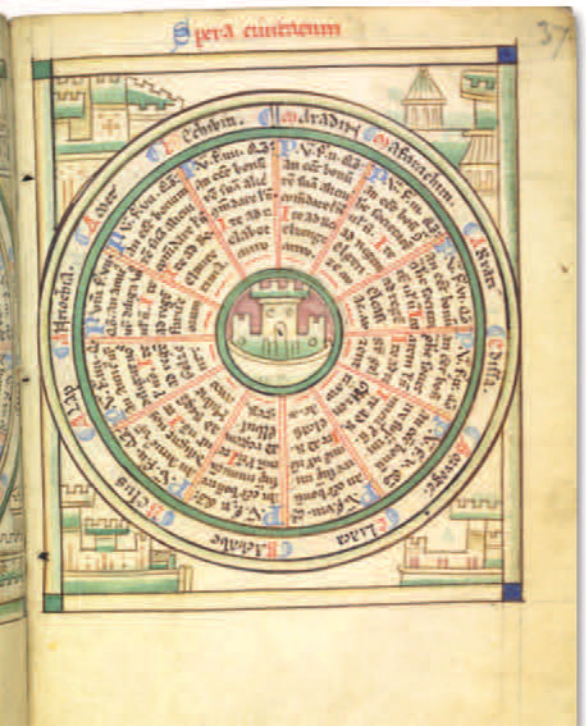
Scene from the thirteenth-century *Life of St. Alban* by Matthew Paris showing the Martyrdom of St. Alban.

This detail from Matthew Paris's thirteenth-century account of *The Life of King Edward the Confessor* shows the Return of Earl Godwine and his sons to the court of Edward the Confessor.

Norwegian mission may well have followed from his new-found prominence on Henry III's horizons, although it remains surprising that a monk who held no office should have been entrusted with as task as significant as the reform of a whole monastery.

Epic history

It is for his writing of so many histories that Matthew has held such renown for so long. He compiled an account of the events of England, the British Isles, and the European mainland continuously for a quarter of a century, from 1235 until his, presumed, death at the end of the 1250s. Few monastic chroniclers kept a detailed record of current affairs for decades in this way. Many monasteries' annals were the work of multiple contributors, forming, in effect, a relay that ran through one monastic generation. Orderic Vitalis (d. 1142), monk of St Évroul in Normandy, who chronicled for thirty years, and St Albans' own Thomas Walsingham (d. ca. 1422), an historian who modelled himself on Matthew, and narrated national events for five decades from 1376 are perhaps the only monastic chroniclers who out-performed Paris' longevity.



A page from a text on prognostication by Matthew Paris showing an image of the spheres. Other sections cover animals, fruits, and flowers.

Matthew made two versions of his narrative, one immensely detailed, giving several thousand words of coverage to each year; the other structured quite differently, condensing the drama in key scenes that are arresting and punchy to read. Both versions he also illustrated with his own artwork, an array of images from inset details of coats of arms to portraits and complete scenes capturing all the action of a particular episode.

Illustrated copies of chronicles became common in later centuries. Of the 100-odd surviving manuscripts of Jean Froissart's history of the Hundred Years War, many carry finely detailed scenes. But in his own time, Matthew's combination of word and image to convey current affairs was innovative. That his illustrations were his own work is almost unique among monastic historians.

Research

Matthew made an epic of the events of his own day but he also reached into past history, as far back as the Norman Conquest, to revise the narrative compiled by a St. Albans monk of the previous generation, Roger Wendover. He also investigated the history of the abbey itself, gathering early archival records and what appear to have been earlier efforts at writing a history of the abbey, to create a new sweeping history of the foundation reaching all the way from its shadowy, Saxon origins as far as his own time. This work, which he called the *Deeds of the Abbots of St. Albans*, presented accounts of no fewer than twenty-three abbots who had served the abbey over five centuries. Other monasteries recorded their history through the biographies of their abbots, but again they tended to be kept

This pair of slippers once belonged to Edmund of Abingdon (ca. 1174–1240), one of the saints that Matthew Paris studied and chronicled.

© Sukkoria / Wikimedia Commons

up in relay, one monk passing the task to another down the generations. Typically, Matthew took it all on himself.

Saints' Lives

Matthew was not only a chronicler. As might be expected of a cloister monk who seems to have been imbued with the core obligation of any monk to keep up the cycle of worship in the church, he also wrote lives of past and present saints celebrated in the English Church, Edward the Confessor, Edmund of Abingdon, Thomas Becket, and his own patron saint, Alban. For these, he worked not only in Latin but also the French vernacular, intending to provide narratives to be heard, if not read by any member of lay society. It is possible it was his sharing of his saints' lives, his hagiography, with St. Albans' high society patrons that first brought him to the attention of Henry III and his court.

Historical method

But even this writing for the purposes of religious devotion often displayed Matthew's characteristics as a historian: in tracing the career history of Edmund of Abingdon, who had been archbishop of Canterbury from 1233 to his death in 1240, Matthew drew on anecdotes that came to him only second hand and used them to create dialogue and dramatic scenes.

It is these that make his chronicle of his own time so compelling. The leading figures, King Henry, his queen, Eleanor of Provence, the king's brother, Richard, earl of Cornwall, are cast as characters in a vivid drama. They speak directly in the narrative, their tone capturing the febrile climate of court life, turning on a pin-head from good humour to violent anger. Matthew's ability to evoke this was due to the fact that, for several years after 1247, he was a first-hand witness, joining the king at Westminster, and at other provincial palaces, and coming into the company of the royal party when they visited St. Albans. But it was also based on his cultivation of a network of informants, not only members of the royal family but lesser figures, clerks and clergy who served in royal government.

Matthew gives us the world as he saw it: a working monk in a busy, well-connected monastery, never far from the drama of some of the most unstable years in England's medieval history. At a distance of 750 years, that is very valuable indeed. MW

James G. Clark is editor of* The Cambridge Companion to Matthew Paris *(Cambridge University Press, 2026).

© John C 303 / Shutterstock

Aerial view of St. Albans Cathedral, which was begun in 1077. It is the shrine to Britain's first saint. The building displays Romanesque and English Gothic architectural features.

© British Library, MS Royal C.vii, fol. 6r

A detail in Matthew Paris' *Chronica Maiora* contains an image of the monk himself. Few specific details about his life are known today.

© Va_Va_Val / Wikimedia Commons

Detail of the plaster cast (with restored gilding) of the tomb effigy of King Henry III of England at Westminster Abbey.

A lead pilgrim badge, dated to ca. 1300–1500, representing the martyrdom of Saint Alban.

© St Albans Museum

© Laila R. / Shutterstock

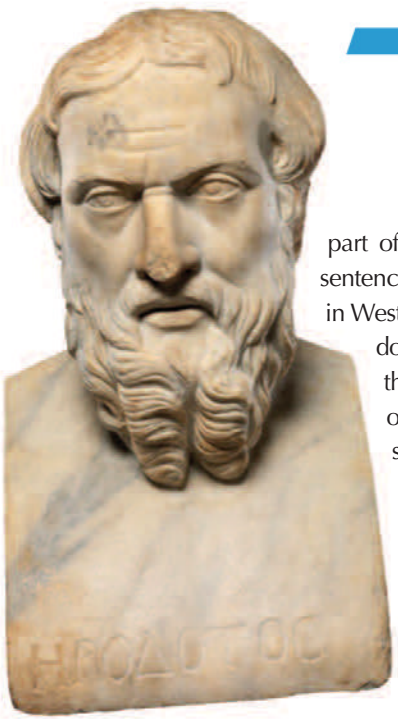
View of Munkholmen Island where Benedictine monks built Nidarholm Abbey during the early eleventh century. Matthew Paris spent time here at the behest of King Haakon IV.

Cristian Bratu

MAKING HISTORY PERSONAL

SEEING IS BELIEVING?

Across ancient Greece, medieval Europe, and the medieval Arab world, historians and travelers increasingly positioned themselves within their own narratives. What began as autopsia*, or knowledge grounded in direct observation, gradually expanded into forms of self-narration in which the author's experiences, movements, and judgments became essential to the history being conveyed.*



A Roman marble bust of Herodotus from the second century AD, based on an earlier fourth-century BC Greek work.

This shift did not simply enhance credibility; it transformed the very nature of historical writing by making the historian's life and voice part of the story itself. In the very first sentence of the founding work of history in Western literature, the *Histories*, Herodotus declares, "Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus" (Herodotus 1.1.0). This opening has become one of the most celebrated in historical writing.

Herodotus offers several clues for how he conducted his research. In Book One, Herodotus appears to have drawn extensively on the knowledge preserved by the Persians, which he reproduces second-hand. Yet, when recounting the story of Alyattes, king of Lydia, Herodotus changes register and emphasizes hearing the story. Judging from the many references to hearing, Herodotus reveals himself to have been a consummate listener.

Elsewhere, he elaborates on his methods of inquiry. In Book Two, for example, Herodotus notes that he journeyed to Egypt to learn about its history, customs, and traditions. He adds: "The information I gained there led me to travel to Thebes and Heliopolis, to try and find out whether their accounts would agree with what I had heard in Memphis, because there are said to be no Egyptians more learned than the Heliopolitans" (Herodotus 2.3). This passage is pivotal, for it marks the emergence of Herodotus as a character within his own narrative. He also dramatizes his own research process, presenting himself not merely as a compiler of reports but as an active investigator. The narrator now steps into view, becoming a participant within the very world he describes.

The so-called Hereford Map is a *Mappa Mundi* from the thirteenth century and one of the largest in the world. It was discovered above the altar of Hereford Cathedral, England — hence its name.

More than a character, Herodotus is also an itinerant eyewitness eager to describe the results of his personal observations.

Throughout Book Two, Herodotus foregrounds his own investigative itinerary: he travels, questions, compares sources, and even sets the limits of his own authority. What emerges from these considerations is a character participating in his own story: a narrator, eyewitness and character persona who structures his narrative around his personal experience and critical judgment.

Yet, it is worth observing that such an emphasis on direct observation aligns more naturally with geographic or ethnographic inquiry than with our modern concept of history, given that the latter often concerns events that the author could not have personally witnessed. This emphasis on eyewitness status serves several functions. It enhances the credibility of the historian: the more Herodotus shows himself as a witness, the more persuasive his claims appear. It also allows him to challenge the authority of his predecessors. By his methods, Herodotus constructs a model of historical authorship based on critical verification and the *embodied* presence of the historian. The frequency of such self-referential passages in Book Two, nearly thirty instances by some counts, testifies to the narrative importance of Herodotus's own voice.

Herodotus may have intended to bolster his credentials, but in so doing, the *autopsia* (Greek: to see for oneself) gradually evolves into an incipient *autobiography*. The sum of his travels, encounters, and methodological choices becomes inseparable from the history he writes. In so doing, he not only transformed the very nature of historical writing but also inaugurated a dynamic nexus between history-writing, *autopsia*, and autobiography.

This papyrus fragment with text from Herodotus' *Histories* dates to ca. AD 200.

Eyewitness authority

The point where seeing, narration, and self-presentation meet, takes on a variety of forms, particularly during the Middle Ages. In medieval France, firsthand accounts became increasingly prominent beginning

Detail from the *Roman de Gillion de Trazegnies* by Lieven van Lathem and David Aubert, dated to 1464, showing the author hearing the story of Gillion de Trazegnies.

The miniature from the fifteenth-century *Book of Wonders* depicts the departure of Jean de Mandeville, encouraged by the King of England. Jean is a mysterious figure of medieval travel literature.

Detail from the eleventh-century *Accessiones ad Gesta Normannorum ducum Guillelmi Gemmeticensis* by William of Jumièges, showing the author handing over his work to William the Conqueror.

in the twelfth century, during the era of the early crusades. The anonymous *Deeds of the Franks* was composed by someone who witnessed the First Crusade, while Baudri de Bourgueil's *History of Jerusalem* and Guibert de Nogent's *Deeds of God through the Franks* relied heavily on eyewitness testimony.

The earliest major prose historians writing in French, Geoffrey de Villehardouin and Robert de Clari, were two thirteenth-century aristocrats whose authority stemmed from their direct involvement in and eyewitness experience of the Fourth Crusade, something both writers highlight repeatedly. In his chronicle of the conquest of Constantinople, Villehardouin solemnly states that he was present at all the councils of the Fourth Crusade. De Clari likewise calls attention to his position as an eyewitness, describing himself as "he who saw and heard" what he recounts. Moreover, numerous sections of these crusader chronicles read like travel narratives.

Villehardouin offers extensive descriptions of his journeys in preparation for and during the Fourth Crusade and of the intricate negotiations he undertook in his capacity as marshal to Thibaut III of Champagne and, later, to Baldwin I, the first Latin emperor of Constantinople. Villehardouin, serving as the army's chief of staff, recounts the campaign through vivid, matter-of-fact descriptions of travel by sea, the mustering and movement of ships, and the hazards of storms and landings. He highlights the bold amphibious assault, the capture of Galata, and individual feats of bravery.

A fifteenth-century Italian leather case which was used to hold and protect books while travelling.

Later, Villehardouin describes his involvement in the expedition to relieve another important figure in the Fourth Crusade, Renier of Trith. This episode highlights the breadth of Villehardouin's movements across the fragmented political landscape of the post-1204 Balkans. As part of the mission, he traveled deep into enemy-held territory. Villehardouin, positioned at the head of the advancing forces, recounts the campaign as one of bold forward motion; an operation carried out across difficult terrain and far from secure Latin strongholds. He characterizes the expedition not merely as a military duty but as a thrilling and daring venture that affirmed his growing stature as a commander, especially after his earlier success in extricating the shattered army at Adrianople.

His travels continued as political responsibilities expanded, and he continues his story. Through these accounts, Villehardouin's memoirs present a vivid picture of constant movement, negotiation, and strategic travel across contested Balkan territories.

DID YOU KNOW?

This investigative endeavor is what Herodotus terms *historein*, a Greek verb meaning "to inquire," "to investigate," or "to visit in order to become acquainted with." Ultimately, *historein* is derived from the Indo-European root *wid, which means "to see," and it also constitutes the etymological root of the modern term "history" (Darbo-Peschanski 2007, 28, 435-441).

A detail from a copy of Marco Polo's *Book of Wonders*, dated ca. 1410, depicting the Polo brothers leaving Venice on their way to more exotic destinations.

The writings of Abū Hāmid al-Gharnatī

Such movements from *autopsia* to incipient autobiography are not unique to Europe but also emerge within the medieval Arab tradition. Abū Hāmid al-Andalusī al-Gharnatī (1080–1169) was an exceptionally wide-ranging Arab traveler whose movements shaped every aspect of his writings. From childhood onward, his life unfolded through continual displacement: fleeing Granada at age ten, escaping again after the Battle of Uclés, and eventually sailing for Alexandria via Sardinia and Sicily, where he seems to have witnessed an eruption of Mount Etna. His travels carried him across the Middle East, the Balkans, and southern Russia.

In his main works, *The Gift of Hearts* and *Exposition of Some of the Wonders of the West*, Abū Hāmid insistently foregrounds his presence as an eyewitness, as when he writes, "I set sail on the Caspian Sea and reached a mighty river like a sea...," or when describing his life in Saqsīn: "My home is now, in fact, among them…" His sensory detail reinforces this presence, whether marveling at enormous fish he had "never seen in any part of the world," recounting crossing the frozen Volga, or describing the extreme cold of Bulgar, where, he says, "one of my sons died there and I could not bury him."

Abū Hāmid's narrative blends sight, taste, and touch, as in his praise of Khwārazm's fruits "sweeter and more delicious than sugar with honey," and his report from Bulgar: "In Bulghār, I saw a man … more than seven cubits tall." Autobiographical elements strengthen his claims to experiential truth. Through this combination of travel, sensory detail, and self-presentation, Abū Hāmid fashions himself as a credible and present eyewitness. Working in an entirely different tradition and likely without any knowledge of Herodotus, Abū Hāmid fuses *autopsia* with self-representation, making the traveler's body and memory central to the transmission of knowledge.

Conclusion

Both in the ancient and medieval worlds, historians sometimes inserted themselves into the narrative, blending the credibility of their own observations and experiences with the stories they were told and the landscapes they travelled through to provide a richer, more authoritative story.

Cristian Bratu is a Professor of French at Baylor University, specializing in medieval historiography, authorship, and narrative identity, with extensive publications on medieval chronicles and authorial self-representation.

A spread from a copy of the *Tabula Rogeriana* by Muhammad al-Idrisi (1250-1325), depicting the Iberian Peninsula, home to the contemporary author Abū Hāmid al-Andalusī al-Gharnatī.

Thomas Denholm

How *chansons de geste* shaped medieval war stories

FROM EPIC TO CHRONICLE

When we think of medieval chronicles, we often imagine a simple record of events, an attempt to reflect 'true' history. Yet, behind the recording of deeds lies the art of storytelling. French vernacular chroniclers were not merely logging the incidents of their day; in their writing they were portraying their culture, tradition, and language.

This detail from the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, illustrated by Simon Marmion, and dated to ca. 1450, shows the eight stages from *The Song of Roland*.

Medieval chroniclers were greatly influenced by epic tradition, in particular *chansons de geste* (sing: *chanson de geste*): epic tales of chivalry, morality, and martial prowess. The stories contained within their surviving works come alive with flourishes inspired by the ideals of the epic tales that preceded them.

A thirteenth-century fresco from the Ferrande Tower in Pernes-les-Fontaines, France, showing William of Orange, a hero of many *chansons de geste*, riding out to challenge the Saracen giant Isoré.

The first folio from the *Life of Saint Louis* by Jean de Joinville, dated to ca. 1335, shows the author dedicating his work to an enthroned King Louis X.

The world of the epic

Chansons de geste began to emerge in the twelfth century, building on the existing oral traditions of storytelling. As a genre, such writing takes its historical roots from the Carolingian period (ca. eighth-ninth centuries), the formative years of the concept of 'knighthood' and precursor to ideas of 'chivalry'. Many *chansons de geste* portray similar themes such as divine right, noble sacrifice, and military success. Always at their heart lies a strong hero who is an excellent warrior and, more often than not, morally righteous.

The Song of Roland is archetypal of these works and one of the earliest; likely composed around the time of the First Crusade (1098–1101). Based loosely on real events, it describes Roland's part in the campaigns of Charlemagne in Iberia in the 770s, nobly sacrificing himself when the army's rearguard is ambushed by Saracen foes. He is the quintessential noble knight, brimming with honour and righteousness. His impressive feats of arms protect and honour his lord, Charlemagne, remaining a true vassal to the end. He is diametrically opposed to the veritable villain of the tale, Ganelon, who betrays his kin and is duly punished for his lacklustre morals.

Later, *chansons de geste* tend to follow a similar structure. William, Count of Orange, is the principal character for perhaps the second most famous cycle of *chansons de geste* of this period. Set in a fictional version of ninth-century France and Iberia, William appears in a series of poems detailing his epic adventures. He shares in Roland's valiance and loyalty but in service to his role as the ideal baron, rather than a warrior. Pragmatic and wise, William exemplifies the merits of disciplined loyalty to his liege King Louis.

But not all *chansons de geste* centre on virtuous heroes. *Raoul de Cambrai*, likely composed in the late twelfth century, shows the potential for chivalric ideals to be corrupted by hatred and vengeance. In this source, we lose much of the idealism present in other *chansons de geste*; in fact, Raoul is barely a hero at all. He is undoubtedly a great warrior, but his followers desert him due to his excessive pride and lack of moderation. The deterioration of his character culminates in the burning of Origny (including its nunnery), and he is ultimately slain by his once closest friend and vassal Bernier. The poem's brutality in some ways serves as a moral lesson to the audience.

All of these texts idealize, and in many ways revolve around, the depiction of warfare, combining chivalric ideals with often brutal violence. As vernacular prose writing started to develop, plenty of authors began incorporating the grandeur of epic tradition into 'fact' based historical chronicles.

A Mamluk metal basin of ca. 1340 with the name of Hugh of Lusignan, King of Cyprus, and the arms of Ibelin and Jerusalem.

The birth of vernacular history

In the early thirteenth century, we begin to see the influence of the epic tradition of *chansons de geste* as vernacular histories begin to be favoured over Latin ones. Villehardouin's *Conquest of Constantinople*, Joinville's *Life of Saint Louis*, and

A detail from the *Grandes Chroniques de France* showing Saint Louis embarking on the Eighth Crusade. Louis' exploits were detailed in John of Joinville's work.

Novare's *History of the War Between Frederick II and the Ibelins* all display core characteristics taken from the tales of Roland, William, and Raoul. All three authors were knights and to some extent involved in the events they describe. Their texts were commissioned and written for an audience of the knightly class, who were for the first time able to enjoy prose in their own vernacular French. Naturally, this audience would also appreciate popular elements of *chansons de geste*. The Champagne region, from where both Joinville and Villehardouin hailed, was a hotbed of this new thriving literary culture.

This detail from the *Chronicle of William of Tyre*, dated to 1295, features an illuminated capital depicting the arrival of Alice of Cyprus in Acre.

An illumination from a thirteenth-century manuscript with a text by Chretien de Troyes, showing his patron, Marie of Champagne (d. 1198).

We see these chroniclers making use of several topoi present across *chansons de geste*. They would often declare their status as eye-witnesses to events, hearkening back to the oral tradition where the storyteller would emphasize their unique perspective, and the truths which only they could know. Like the beginning of a great epic tale, Novare begins his text by writing "here begins the story and true account." Novare was also typical in inserting himself into the narrative in ways that were unlikely. However, we can see how by accentuating his role and influence over a pivotal moment in the civil war, Novare can centre himself as an epic narrator.

Both Joinville and Novare cast a knightly hero as their protagonist with King Louis IX and John of Ibelin, respectively. Crusading hero King Louis IX was confirmed as a saint in 1297 and provided Joinville with the ideal moral figurehead for his hagiography. In Joinville's chronicle, he is the model Christian who died on crusade in the ultimate act of martyrdom,

Fragment from a late thirteenth-century edition of the *Willehalm* (ca.1210-1220), an unfinished work written in Middle High German by Wolfram von Eschenbach. It borrows heavily from *Aliscans*, a twelfth-century French *chanson de geste*.

a lesson to his Capetian successors. Inspiration from the pious martyr of Roland is clear. Villehardouin deploys the Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, as a great central character in his narrative. When making a speech at the outset of the Fourth Crusade (despite being old and blind!) he pledges to lead the crusading pilgrims, kneeling at an altar as the cross is sewn onto his garments. Again, we can see the influence of Roland in the depiction of the Doge's bravery and piety. For Novare, John of Ibelin fulfilled more of the William of Orange role. John is a steadfast baron who, despite his misuse by his liege lord Emperor Frederick II, displays the core knightly attributes of piety, prowess, and virtue.

Realism and chivalric combat

We can see more examples of how our chroniclers adapted epic and moral structures to frame the real conflicts they are describing. In *chansons de geste* often the protagonists fought against overwhelming odds, a trope that chroniclers mimic. Novare, for example, stirs up fantastical and hyperbolic images when detailing the battle of Agridi (15 June 1232), making out that the enemy Longobards led by Filangieri felt compelled to attack the Cypriot/Ibelin force as they had "so few men and such poor armour." Unsurprisingly, the Ibelins prevailed against the odds, with Novare's portrayal reading like a David versus Goliath story.

Single combat was also a narrative device influenced by *chansons de geste*, which chroniclers utilised. Novare provides a vivid description of a judicial duel between two nobles, Amaury Barlais and Anceau de Brie. We receive a literal blow by blow account of the scuffle between the two heavily armed men, smashing into each other on horseback and then trading blows with swords. While comparable to the fantastic duels in *chansons de geste*, Novare is eager to inject an element of realism. He describes Amaury being pulled from his horse and injured by the sheer weight of his armour as he falls. And so, while the combat of these chroniclers continued to extol the virtues and values inherent in the epic tradition, the presentation tended to be more realistic than in *chansons de geste*.

A silver grosso of Enrico Dandolo. It is dated between 1192 and 1205, with Christ enthroned on one side and the doge with St. Mark on the other.

Legacy and afterlife

We have seen some examples of how epic tradition naturally bled into the emerging vernacular histories of the thirteenth century. The blend of heroism, morality, and violence shaped not only these chronicles but even our modern interpretations of the Middle Ages and knighthood. Villehardouin, Joinville, and Novare used ideas from oral tradition to add colour to their work.

The growing role of women and courtly love would accompany a burgeoning interest in fantasy and elaborate narrative structures. Over time, the sense of duty and honour ever present in *chanson de geste* and our earlier chronicles fades as adventuring knights become the fashion for ever more mythical stories. **MW**

Thomas Denholm holds degrees in Medieval History from the University of Glasgow and writes on medieval history on his Substack blog They Did What?! History's Weird and Wonderful.

Conflict and the crusades

The increasingly volatile conflicts across French territories combined with the fervour for the crusades impacted the work of medieval writers. Some of these authors were writing after the stunning success of the First Crusade, of which oral history and *chanson de geste* cycles were reminiscing. Meanwhile, the terrifying rise of the Muslim ruler Saladin and the Ayyubid dynasty in the Holy Land had triggered a fresh need for willing crusaders. Memories of the ultimate crusader, Godfrey of Bouillon, the central figure of the crusading *chanson* cycle, would have circulated and sung across the courts of Western Europe. Like other heroes we have discussed, he was the pinnacle of the chivalric ideal. Our chroniclers were not just extolling the virtues of their patrons; their activities were a recruitment drive, and one that could culminate in the remission of all sins.

An illumination from the fourteenth-century *Chronicle of William of Tyre and His Successors* shows Godfrey of Bouillon leading a Crusader army.

Despite these aspirations, back in France, successive wars consumed the knightly and baronial classes, who were becoming increasingly violent. Mutilation of one's foe at bloody battles such as at Bouvines (27 July 1214) epitomised a growing animosity. With accusations on both sides, these chronicles offered the opportunity for the authors to moralise about contemporary events and justify their own actions. Although these chronicles ostensibly aimed to hold a mirror up to contemporary figures, reminding them of the pious and virtuous paths of their forebears, like the *chanson de geste*, they also offered the opportunity for the self-validation of the social elite.

Modern reenactors continue to hold tournaments and recreate medieval battles — with varying degrees of accuracy — all over the world. This image is from a joust held near Moscow, Russia in 2019.

An ongoing fascination

Robert Jones

MEDIEVAL CHIVALRY IN THE MODERN WORLD

There is a tendency to believe that medieval chivalry died out with the arrival of gunpowder and the rise of the middle classes. However, medieval chivalry continues to have an impact on the world to this day.

Chivalry has constantly evolved to fit the cultural, political, and military circumstances of the time. Even commentators as far back as the twelfth-century cleric Peter of Blois saw their own time as the point at which the chivalric elite had lost its way and gone into terminal decline. Yet, to the present day, medieval chivalry fascinates audiences, and it is used, and abused, for entertainment and propaganda.

Chivalry as it should have been

In 1966, a group of history buffs in Berkeley, California held a costume party. The centrepiece was a "tournament, in which all knights would defend in single combat the title of the 'fairest' for their ladies." The event was so successful they held another, and another. Today, the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) is a worldwide organisation some 30,000 members strong. The SCA seeks to recreate the medieval world — its combat, craft, and culture — not as it was, warts and all, but as it should have been. Kingdoms, titles, names, and heraldic devices are imagined, and medieval culture is cherry-picked for those elements that appeal to its members.

Other forms of reenactment exist today. The dinner theatre experience *Medieval Times* offers guests an opportunity to join "the King and Queen of Spain" for a feast while cheering for their favourite knight. The knights have taken "a pledge to be chivalrous in every aspect of their lives… strong, agile and pure of heart," as they fight each other for entertainment and the title of "Champion of the Realm."

Heritage sites across Europe offer tournament spectacles and battle reenactments throughout the summer, where professionals and amateurs don recreations of medieval harness, and seek to provide a simulation of medieval combat, incorporating aspects of medieval chivalry, too. Just as with *Medieval Times*, displays based upon the medieval *pas d'armes* and tournament are common, allowing the audience and participants to recreate a form of chivalry at play.

A postcard from 1934–1936 featuring a painting by Hubert Lanzinger that depicts Adolf Hitler as a knight. Various authoritarian regimes have made use of imagery featuring 'the knight in shining armour'.

Chivalry at the movies

The medieval period has also informed modern movies. Following the romanticised version of chivalry popularised in the nineteenth century by such works as Robert Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, or Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, the movies of the 1950s, such as *Prince Valiant* or *The Black Knight*, focused on chivalry as a code of honour. They emphasised loyalty and duty to a king (almost invariably Arthur), recounting the tale of a young knight wronged by a treacherous villain who is then overcome by the righteous prowess of the hero, often in single combat.

More modern movies have taken different turns; whether it be a focus on the physical and bloody violence, seen in movies such as *Ironclad* or *Arn*, or a more humorous, even ludicrous take, such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* or the French time travel movie *Les Visiteurs*.

A Knight's Tale, starring Heath Ledger as a common servant who pretends to be a knight to win renown on the tournament circuit of a wholly and unashamedly anachronistic fourteenth century, might be seen as coming closest to capturing the flavour of medieval chivalric culture. It weaves into the plot vignettes from actual medieval sources, like Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century Arthurian tales, *The History of William Marshal*, or the fourteenth-century chronicles of Froissart.

Shadows of the past

Much of the modern fascination with chivalry and knighthood is about reimagining it for the purpose of entertainment. This same fascination has also been used for darker purposes. In the two world wars, both sides used the image of the medieval knight as a noble warrior fighting for an honourable cause, or as the ancestors of a contemporary warrior elite fighting an age-old enemy. The two totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, in particular, drew direct parallels between their contemporary conflict and war between the Teutonic Order and the kingdoms and principalities that would come to make up Russia. Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 movie *Aleksandr Nevsky* is, perhaps, the pinnacle of this propaganda.

Although we like to think of knights in shining armour and chivalry as a code of honour and fair play, that was not their totality. Unfortunately, some of medieval chivalry's less savoury aspects — its intolerance of other races and religions, dismissive attitude toward the weak, and the casual violence to prove masculine prowess — have also proven politically resonant today. MW

Robert Jones is a Visiting Scholar in History at Franklin and Marshall College, PA, and Admissions Manager at Haberdashers' Monmouth School.

(Top) Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament is a chain of dinner theatres located across the US. They invite the audience to enjoy a medieval-themed performance while eating.

(Bottom left) In the intentionally anachronistic *A Knight's Tale* (2001), commoner William Thatcher earns himself a knighthood.

(Bottom right) Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975) parodies King Arthur and his knights' chivalric adventures.

(Left) Modern-day 'knights' have access to a large and fairly affordable range of period-appropriate arms and armour reproductions, making it easier than ever to live out dreams of an imagined medieval past.

Origins, commercial centers, fortifications

THE TRANSYLVANIAN SAXONS

Karl Gagesch

The origin of Transylvanian Saxons can be traced back to the twelfth century when waves of ethnically German colonists emigrated from the Holy Roman Empire and settled in the southern basin of the Carpathian Mountains. In Transylvania, the Saxons established new roots and embraced a role as defenders of the southern border of the Kingdom of Hungary. They built numerous fortifications to protect their domains.

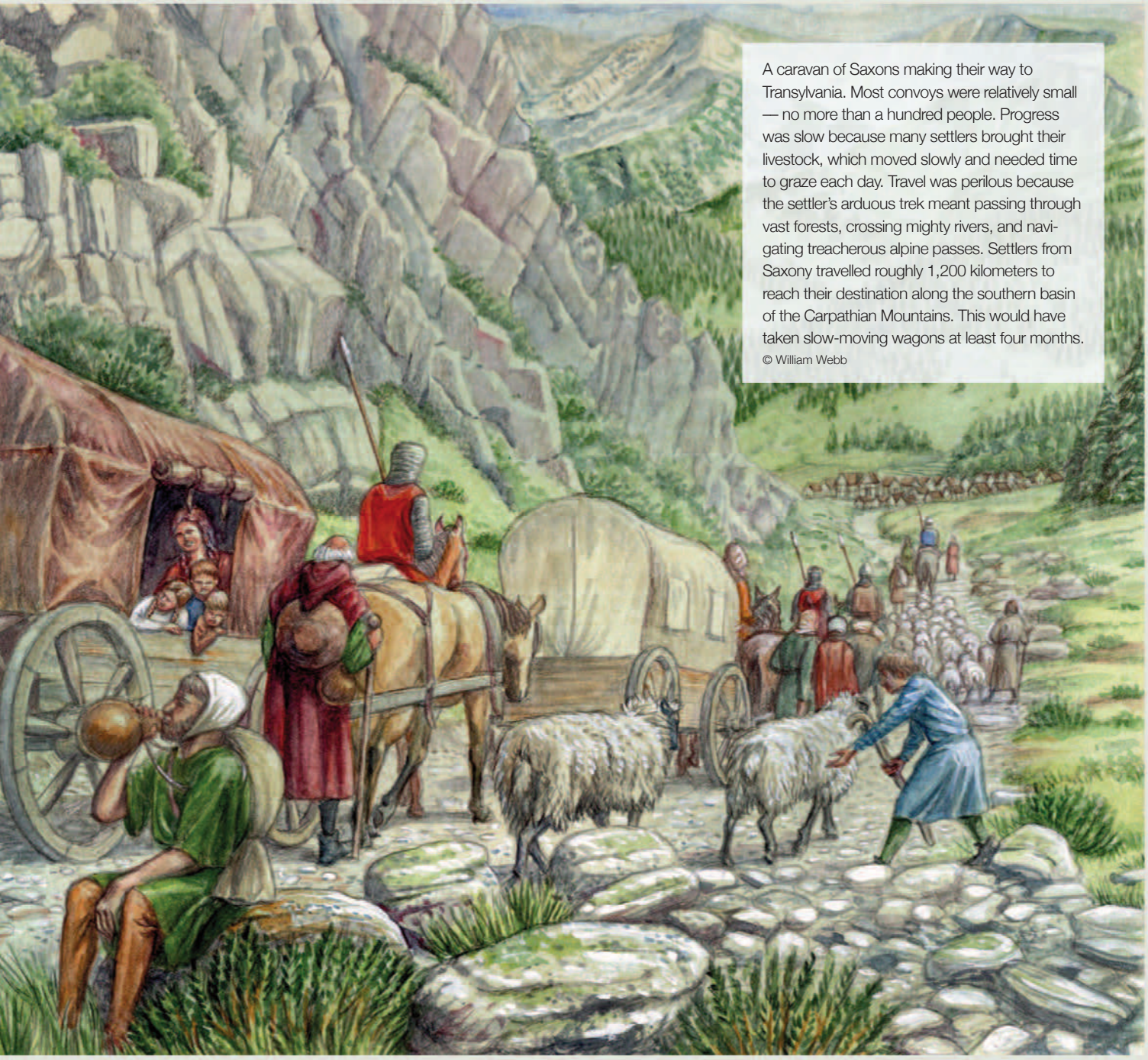
One of the painted tombstones of a Saxon bishop housed in the Mausoleum Tower of Biertan's fortified church.

During the twelfth century, the Kingdom of Hungary faced significant challenges from nomadic groups of raiders who regularly crossed the Carpathian Mountains and caused havoc in the southern part of the realm. Kings such as Geza II (r. 1141–1162) responded to this threat by extending invitations for colonists to settle in the southern basis of these majestic mountains. Chief among the states from which settlers were sought was the Holy Roman Empire.

Geza's heralds travelled through many parts of the Holy Roman Empire spreading the news that free land and civil liberties were available in Hungary for those willing to make the long journey. Frederic Barbarossa (r. 1155–1190), ruler of the Holy Roman Empire at that time, faced mounting pressure from a growing population, so he granted permission for those who wanted to emigrate to the Kingdom of Hungary.

Early history

This offer appealed to a wide cross section of people including landless nobles, miners, craftsmen, and farmers. The composition of the first groups of settlers varied considerably. Most came from the wine-making region of the Moselle valley in western Germany, from Luxembourg, and from the fertile valleys of



A caravan of Saxons making their way to Transylvania. Most convoys were relatively small — no more than a hundred people. Progress was slow because many settlers brought their livestock, which moved slowly and needed time to graze each day. Travel was perilous because the settler's arduous trek meant passing through vast forests, crossing mighty rivers, and navigating treacherous alpine passes. Settlers from Saxony travelled roughly 1,200 kilometers to reach their destination along the southern basin of the Carpathian Mountains. This would have taken slow-moving wagons at least four months.

the Rhine River. Later, groups came from as far away as Flanders and Belgium, as well as from Saxony, Bavaria, and East Francia. By 1206, these settlers were collectively referred to in Latin as *Saxones* in royal documents issued by the Hungarian Crown. Over time, settlers adopted the Germanic version of this name and called themselves Saxons.

At first, local Hungarians who saw the long trains of wagons and herds of livestock crossing their lands feared the newcomers. Some medieval Hungarian chronicles depicted the early arrivals as thieves because the local population was relocated to make way for these new settlers, giving the impression that Saxon settlers were stealing their land. This, however, was not the case. The Saxon colonists were settled on land granted to them by King Geza as part of his efforts to attract these colonists. Little else is recorded about the early waves of Saxon settlers other than that these adventurous newcomers were well prepared and well organized. Any lingering ethnic rivalries over land were replaced by a broad appreciation of the farming and building expertise the colonists brought with them and their willingness to partner with local Hungarians to defend the Kingdom of Hungary's southern border.

When the first Saxon settlers began arriving in the fall of 1141, they were pleased with their new homeland in the Alt River valley. The land was fertile, the woodlands were filled with game, and the region was picturesque, lying in the basin of the majestic Carpathian Mountains whose snow-covered peaks rose to 2,400 meters.

DID YOU KNOW?

By the end of the thirteenth century, there were 68 Saxon settlements in Transylvania. This grew to over 159 settlements within a hundred years and continued to grow until over 300 Saxon villages dotted the picturesque and copious countryside in the western basin of the Carpathian Mountains.

The *Chronica Hungarorum*, by János Thuróczy, depicts the Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241/1242.

The initial distribution of the main Saxon districts in the Transylvanian region of the Carpathian Mountains.

The first waves of settlers continued to arrive until roughly 1161. Land was allocated to each new group of colonists by Geza's commissioners. The best land was in the Alt River valley in the southwestern basin of the Carpathian Mountains, which they called '*Altland*', and it was there that Saxons built their first villages and churches.

Subsequent phases of colonizing continued well into the thirteenth century. Later groups of settlers included miners who were given land in the northeastern basin of the Carpathians, an area known since ancient times to be rich in minerals and salt deposits. Colonizing this region was particularly appealing to the Hungarian Crown because of the tax revenues derived from what quickly became very lucrative mining operations. This region became known as the *Nösnerland*.

Most settlers sought a rural lifestyle of farming and raising livestock so undertook the difficult task of cultivating the raw land. Saxon settlers brought with them the latest farming technology and innovations available in the Middle Ages, including skills needed to build larger barns, improved scythes for harvesting, and the knowledge of how to maintain soil fertility through a system of crop rotation. These innovations allowed Saxon colonists to quickly tame the Transylvanian wilderness and turn it into a bountiful homeland.

DID YOU KNOW?

Saxons named their homeland *Siebenbürgen* in honour of their seven largest and most prosperous towns. In German, *Sieben* means seven and *Burg* means castle, so *Siebenbürgen* translates into English as "Seven Castles." Hungarians made no such distinction and called the region Transylvania, which in Latin means "land beyond the forest," because the entire region was heavily covered by dense expanses of old growth forest.

Commercial centers and trade

In 1342, Ludwig the Great (r. 1342–1382) became ruler of the combined kingdoms of Hungary and Poland. Ludwig's kingdom was the largest in Europe at that time, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the north, to the Adriatic Sea in the south, and to the Black Sea in the east. During Ludwig's reign, the Saxons became cultural and commercial leaders in the southeastern part of his kingdom. Fueled by unimpeded opportunity, the two leading Saxon towns, Kronstadt and Hermannstadt, were among the fastest growing commercial centers in Europe and soon became the two largest cities in the Kingdom of Hungary.

Siebenbürgen received its official coat of arms during Ludwig's reign. The Saxon coat of arms shows seven castles, which represent their seven prominent urban centers, all cast on a field of blue and red. These fortress towns were the centers of Saxon wealth and culture, and because they are represented as castles, reflect the important role Saxons played in defending the southern borders of the Hungarian kingdom.

During this time, Saxon towns also established themselves as the most prominent trading centers in Transylvania. A key element in their commercial success was the sophisticated guild system Saxons used to build regional monopolies over the manufacture and distribution of

Discovered in Transylvannia, this fifteenth-century iron Sallet-type helmet was produced in a German workshop.

View of Aiud Castle — a significant urban fortress in Transylvania — which was first built as a fortified church during the fourteenth century.

craft goods. Hermannstadt alone boasted nineteen guilds that managed the affairs of twenty-five different crafts. Membership in guilds was restricted to Saxons or people of German descent, and laws were enacted to regulate trade and maximize financial benefits for Saxon craftsmen. Saxon guilds became renowned for manufacturing cloth, armour, leather goods, and for their expertise in making gold and silver jewellery.

Another important element behind their commercial success was the emphasis Saxon burghers placed on controlling regional and inter-regional trade. This was made possible because the earliest Saxon towns were all located along established land and water routes that had been used for trade since antiquity. Virtually all trade crossing the Carpathian Mountains travelled through *Siebenbürgen* to reach the markets of Europe in the west and the Ottoman Empire in the east.

Saxon towns also sat along the lucrative trade routes connecting the neighbouring kingdoms of Wallachia and Moldavia, and the east-west trade routes connecting the Balkan region with Central Europe. Controlling these trade routes allowed Saxon merchants to dominate regional trade and become rich. Similarly, taxes on trade moving through *Siebenbürgen* allowed each of the seven major Saxon towns to prosper and accumulate great wealth, some of which was used to invest in their urban infrastructure, with particular emphasis on improving their fortifications.

Fortified locales

The colonization of the southern basin of the Carpathian Mountains was foremost a strategic initiative by the Hungarian

Saxon towns

The earliest Saxon towns were founded between 1184 and 1190, or roughly two to three generations after the first settlers arrived. The locations were carefully selected along well-established trade routes, which over time allowed these towns to dominate regional trade and accumulate great wealth. The seven leading towns were Hermannstadt, the Saxon capital (now Sibiu), Bistritz (now Bistrița), Mediasch (now Mediaș), Klausenburg (now Cluj-Napoca), Schässburg (now Sighișoara), Kronstadt (now Brașov), and Mühlbach (now Sebeș). Each town grew quickly and soon rivaled more established European cities in terms of population, number of skilled craftsmen, and in the amount of trade they conducted. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these seven towns were as heavily fortified as the larger towns in Europe.

Saxon towns played a key role in shaping the political and cultural landscape across *Siebenbürgen*. The Saxons, however, were largely a rural people and at their peak, the seven leading towns were home to no more than thirty percent of the Saxon population. Urban Saxons controlled the commercial and political affairs of their society. Saxon burghers were the educated, affluent elite from which came urbane statesmen who advocated for Saxon interests in the Transylvanian parliament and in the courts of the great powers that controlled Transylvania. Generations of leaders were groomed from among these burghers to manage the economic, military, and political levers that gave Saxons a disproportionately strong role in Transylvanian politics compared to the size of their population.

The medieval city walls on the southeast side of Brașov, with the Black Church visible beyond the walls.

The fortified church in Biertan is among the most famous of medieval Transylvania. It was built in the Gothic style and encircled by several fortification walls.

Crown to build defensive infrastructure to protect its southern frontier. This was accomplished by attracting settlers to colonize this sparsely populated region and serve as border guards. Saxons bravely took up this task and were tested many times by waves of invaders throughout the Middle Ages. Their wealthy towns were heavily fortified and acted as defensive rally points from incoming invaders.

The seven main Saxon towns were all established in the late twelfth century, and each was protected by strong wooden fortifications that included perimeter ditches, stout walls, and numerous watch towers. These defenses adequately protected the Saxon urban population and provided ample defence for neighbouring rural populations when Saxon settlements were confronted by groups of nomadic raiding parties that regularly crossed the Carpathian Mountains and sought plunder in Transylvania. However, these wooden fortifications could not withstand the Mongol invasion of 1241/42. Every Saxon fortified town and most Saxon villages were burned to the ground during the devastating Mongol onslaught. Roughly half the Saxon population perished during this invasion. Most died defending their communities and many others were taken away to be sold into slavery. The Saxons learned a harsh lesson from this devastating experience and proved their resilience by rebuilding and later gradually strengthening their fortifications with stone and brick.

The interior of the curtain wall of Prejmer's fortified church has a total of 272 chambers on three to four levels. These spaces could be accessed through separate entrances, wooden staircases, and walkways.

Hermannstadt, the Saxon capital, was one of the most heavily fortified communities in Central Europe by the fifteenth century. Its defenses included a wide ditch and a high earthen embankment that surrounded the town, then an outer ten-meter-high brick wall and inner wooden wall, both further strengthened by stone bastions and towers. Each of the other major Saxon towns were similarly fortified. For example, Bistrița's walls were strengthened by eighteen stone towers; Mediaș's defenses boasted

DID YOU KNOW?

Only about 20,000 Transylvanian Saxons out of roughly 250,000 Saxons pre-WW2 remain in Romania today.

THE TRANSYLVANIAN SAXONS

A TIMELINE OF EVENTS (CA. 1150 –1700)

CA.1150–1250
The Saxons settle in the southern basin of the Carpathian Mountains, part of the Kingdom of Hungary and establish the first villages.

1241–1242
The first Mongol invasion of the region, which led to widespread destruction of Saxon towns and villages.

1366–1526
Ottoman war with the Kingdom of Hungary.

1479
The Battle of Brotfeld, where the Saxons formed part of a Hungarian army that decisively defeated an Ottoman army.

1400–1500
Universitas Saxonum became the legal framework under which the Saxons expressed their self-government.

1526
The Battle of Mohacs, when the Kingdom of Hungary was defeated. After this point, Transylvania and the Saxon homeland were partitioned between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

1526–1791
The Ottoman/Habsburg Wars was a period when Saxon villages were repeatedly attacked, and Saxon towns were put under siege.

1200 | 1300 | 1400 | 1500 | 1600 | 1700

1224
Hungary's King Andrew II issued the *Diploma Andreanum* or Golden Charter, which secured Saxon privileges.

1285
The second Mongol invasion, which caused significant damage to the Saxon homeland, but the Saxon militia played a key part driving the Mongols out of Transylvania.

1437
Unio Trium Nationum or Union of the Three Nations formalized a regional agreement between the Hungarian nobility, Saxons, and Szeklers for mutual defense and equal shared government of Transylvania.

1438
The siege of Hermannstadt where the Saxons successfully defended the Ottoman attack.

1520–1540
The Protestant Reformation reaches the Saxon homeland. The Saxons convert to Lutheranism and establish the Saxon National Church and their publicly funded education system.

1699
The Treaty of Karlowitz formalized Habsburg control over Transylvania and ushered in Habsburg control over the Saxon homeland.

A silver dinar of Geza II (r. 1141–1162). He was one of several Hungarian rulers to invite colonists to his kingdom.
© www.numisnumismatics.com

a seventy meter-high tower, which was the tallest tower in the southern Transylvanian region; and Kronstadt, which was built at the base of large hill, had stone walls that encircled both its upper and lower parts of the towns and were twelve metres high and two meters thick in some places.

As impressive as this was, roughly three quarters of the Saxon population lived in small, rural villages and also needed a means to defend their homeland. In this area, Saxons adopted the architectural innovation of fortifying their village churches. Saxon fortified churches became a model for turning spiritual sanctuaries into defensive infrastructure. By the mid-fifteenth century, there were approximately 250 fortified churches scattered across the Saxon homeland.

Later in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, Saxon communities grew wealthier and more organized and could afford more ambitious masonry work. Renovations using a Gothic architectural style became common. This afforded the Saxon fortified churches more extravagant spaces for showing religious devotion and heightening a village's ecclesiastical prestige. Pointed arches and ribbed vaults allowed for taller, more spacious interiors and better acoustics. The churches boasted rich sculptural details and elaborate portals. Renovation work also focused on upgrading existing fortifications, often with more elegant designs to reflect the pride of each Saxon community in the late Middle Ages.

The Saxons of Transylvania had a lasting impact on the social, economic, and cultural developments of the Carpathian Mountain region, well beyond the medieval and early modern periods. **MW**

Karl Gagesch is a retired business executive. He is the author of* I Am Saxon*, a work that reflects his enduring commitment to understanding the past and its influence on identity and culture.

© hecke61 / Shutterstock

An aerial view of the thirteenth-century fortified church of Prejmer (Kirchenburg von Tartlau). The church was established by the German Teutonic Knights and then used by the Transylvanian Saxons.

The battle of Hedgeley Moor: 25 April 1464

Murray Dahm

DROPPING YOUR AITCHES

A series of battles fought in Northumberland in 1464 during the Wars of the Roses brought the Lancastrian resistance to the Yorkist king Edward IV to an end. The battles of Hedgeley Moor (25 April) and Hexham (15 May) are often confused in the primary sources and subsumed into a single event that saw the total defeat of the Lancastrians. There are, however, sound reasons to explore each encounter separately, and the focus here is the first battle of Hedgeley Moor.

When his father, Richard Duke of York, was killed at the battle of Wakefield in December 1460, Edward inherited the Yorkist claim to the throne during the Wars of the Roses. Edward went on to win successive victories at the battles of Mortimer's Cross in February 1461 and Towton in March 1461. He deposed Henry VI and took the throne as Edward IV.

After the Battle of Towton in 1461, the defeated Lancastrians retreated to their northern castles of Alnwick, Bamburgh, and Dunstanburgh. In December of the next year, these surrendered to Edward, however. Henry and his wife Margaret of Anjou based themselves in Scotland and led an invasion of Northumberland in 1463, taking back the three castles.

The Lancastrians failed, however, to prevent the Yorkists from concluding a peace with Scotland, which was achieved in 1463. In fact, the escort of the Scottish peace delegation to York in April 1464 played its part in the battle under discussion. Thinking, however, that Yorkist power and support in the north of England was vulnerable, the Lancastrians decided to mount a new campaign in the north. This effort also sought to concentrate support for their side before Edward IV, distracted in Leicester and York, could muster his forces and move to confront them. Moreover, Edward was still at war with France, although a truce had been arranged that would take effect on 1 October 1464.

Sir Ralph Percy, one of the Lancastrian commanders at Hedgeley Moor, attempts to break through the Yorkist lines at the site of Percy's Leap in Northumberland.

Thomas Malory and the battles of Hedgeley Moor and Hexham

When the Wars of the Roses broke out in 1455, Thomas Malory, the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur,* was already in prison. One of the peculiar aspects of Malory's life is that he seems to have spent long periods of time in prison — accused of rape, pillage, and attempted murder. This is disquieting for the author of what would become the most influential work of chivalric literature. Indeed, we know Malory finished his *magnum opus* when he was still in prison, probably in 1469.

Malory was in prison in 1461 when Edward IV won the battle of Towton and took the English throne. He was pardoned and released soon after, however, and served in the northern campaigns from October 1462 onward. Malory was present at the siege of Alnwick castle in November 1462 with William Neville, probably his patron. He was likely involved in the sieges of Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh castles, too, until the surrender of Henry, Duke of Somerset.

William Neville died in January 1463, and his command passed to his brothers, Richard and John. The latter was created Earl of Northumberland in May 1463. In all likelihood, therefore, Malory continued to serve under the Nevilles in the north until the campaign was successfully concluded in May 1464. As such, Malory may have served at both the battles of Hedgeley Moor and Hexham.

The next known fact of Malory's life dates from September 1464 when he witnessed the marriage of John Fielding and Helen Walsh, probably his niece. Nothing in his known biography, therefore, precludes him fighting at the battles in 1464. In 1466 or 1467, a grandson, Nicholas, was born to Thomas' son Robert. By July 1468, however, Malory was back in prison; he was explicitly excluded from a general pardon by Edward IV at that time. And in prison he would remain. He was again explicitly excluded from a pardon in February 1470 and may have died in prison in March 1471. During that final prison term, he completed and published *Le Morte d'Arthur* (in Edward's ninth year, so between March 1469 and March 1470).

The campaign

The Lancastrian army was commanded by the twenty-eight-year-old Henry Beaufort, 3rd Duke of Somerset. After surrendering to the Yorkists in December 1462, Duke Henry had escaped from Wales in December 1463 and rejoined the Lancastrians, heading straight toward Newcastle. He never reached it, however, as he learned that the garrison, his own men, had been replaced by Yorkists. His arrival in the north seems to have inspired a new aggressive policy. Although Henry faced financial woes and his supporters would readily change sides if they could negotiate a deal with Edward, the commoners of Lancashire and Cheshire rose in support of the Lancastrian cause in March 1464. They were soon suppressed, however.

On the other hand, the commons of Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland, and Westmoreland remained sympathetic to the Lancastrian cause, as borne out by the fact that Edward never attempted to levy troops there as he did from other counties. Duke Henry moved through Northumberland in March and April 1464, gathering support from Lancastrian garrisons. They briefly took control of Norham castle in Northumberland and captured Skipton castle in Yorkshire. In addition to Alnwick, Bamburgh, and Dunstanburgh, the Lancastrians also had control of Hexham tower and the castles of Tynemouth, Prudhoe, Bywell, and Langley.

Beaufort was nearly captured at Durham, although it's not clear where he was going. King Henry may have been holding court at Alnwick castle; another source claims the Lancastrian king was at Bamburgh, so Somerset was perhaps headed there. Alternatively, the Duke of Somerset may have been on his way toward another of the Lancaster strongholds; there were several in the area.

Alarmed by the Lancastrian resurgence but distracted by other priorities, such as negotiating peace with both Scotland and France, Edward appointed thirty-three-year-old John Neville, later to be 1st Marquess of Montague, to command a Yorkist force. He was in command at both Hedgeley Moor and Hexham, and decisively defeated the Lancastrians twice within a month. He led only a small force, perhaps of 3,000-4,000 men — all the Yorkists could raise in so short a time. Edward, no doubt, would head north as soon as he could muster more troops, but in the end, they would not be needed. Parliament met at York on 20 February and was prorogued until 5 May — Edward himself was therefore tied up in York until then.

Neville marched to Durham on the way to Newcastle and then further north, on his way to meet with the Scottish delegation and escort them to York. This is another factor in the battle fought at Hedgeley Moor — the Lancastrians attempted to block Neville's progress to meet the Scots. Initially, the meeting between Edward and the delegation was planned for 6 March at Newcastle, but the area was too 'hot' with Lancastrian resistance.

Wherever Duke Henry was, he was soon joined by Sir Ralph Percy and Sir Humphrey Neville with their troops, intent on stopping the Yorkist force under John Neville. If the peace negotiations between the Yorkists and the Scots were successful, they would rob the Lancastrians of their Scottish base – their main base of operations after the defeat at Towton. Somerset had only a small force, however — "fourscore spears and bows too" according to *Gregory's Chronicle* (224).

He laid an ambush for Neville close to Newcastle. The plan was betrayed, however, and the Yorkist army avoided the ambush. Somerset then headed to Alnwick castle where he received reinforcements from the governor of Alnwick, Lord Robert Hungerford, 3rd Baron Hungerford, swelling his force to 5,000 men. This is the number in *Gregory's Chronicle*. Given Neville's modest force of perhaps no more than 4,000 men, which is said to have outnumbered the Lancastrians at Hedgeley Moor, this number may be too large.

The battle site

The armies finally met some 40 miles north of Newcastle, near the route of the

modern A697. Various sites for the battle of Hedgeley Moor are given such as south of Wooler, within a days' march of so of Alnwick castle. Another suggested site for the battle is at the so-called Percy' Leap, half a dozen miles to the east of the modern highway. This site seems more likely than those south of Wooler.

To make things more confusing, the battle was also associated with Percy's Cross, a monument very close to Percy's Leap, and not the same Percy's Cross as the site northwest of Newcastle erected to commemorate the 1388 battle of Otterburn. This Percy's Cross was associated with Sir Ralph Percy governor of both Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh castles who died at Hedgeley Moor commanding a division of the Lancastrian forces. He had surrendered to Edward IV in December 1462, was pardoned and given control of the castles; in 1464, however, he foreswore his oaths and joined with Somerset, who had likewise surrendered to Edward in 1462.

Regardless, this was a very dangerous place for a Yorkist force to be operating, near as it was to the Lancastrian controlled castles — but they needed to pass through it to reach Norham castle to meet the Scots' peace delegation. It is possible that Neville's route north from Newcastle was betrayed to the Lancastrians. A route further east along the coast would have gotten him closer to Norham although it would have passed by the Lancastrian castles at Dunstanburgh and Bamburg.

Who is in charge?

In our sources we have three competing stories of the command of the Lancastrian forces at Hedgeley Moor. One claims that they were commanded by Lord Hungerford alone; another that they were commanded by Hungerford and Lord Thomas Ros (or Roos), 9th Baron Ros; and a third that they were commanded by Ralph Percy. These commanders were, however, under the overall command of the Duke of Somerset. The competing details probably refer to the command of the three battles (divisions) of the Lancastrian army.

Other reconstructions (such as that by Sadler & Speirs in 2007) make Hungerford and Ros commanders of a single battle; another commanded by Percy; and the third by Somerset, Ralph Grey, and Henry Bellingham (who would survive the engagement). Neither Grey nor Bellingham fought at Hexham a month later; Grey stayed in Bamburgh but would receive special, harsh punishment in the aftermath of that battle. Somerset may have been spared the ignominy of having fled at the first Yorkist charge and was thus not associated with the command of a specific division. His forces would flee at the first charge at Hexham again so, perhaps, sparing him of that ignominy at Hedgeley Moor is an error.

Hedgeley Moor: 25 April 1464

The Lancastrian force mustered, blocking the road — the Devil's Causeway which follows the line of the Roman road. Thus, they stopped the progress of Neville to meet the Scottish peace delegation at Norham castle on the Tweed, on the border between Scotland and England.

The engagement was very brief. Although we are not given the strength of either force at Hedgeley Moor, the Lancastrians were apparently outnumbered, and, at the first Yorkist charge, the divisions of Hungerford and Ros fled the field, leaving only that of thirty-nine-year-old Percy. He fought on and attempted to break clear with his retainers. The site of Percy's Leap was apparently the site where his horse jumped in his attempt to escape. After the leap, Percy was unhorsed, wounded, fell and was killed; this was possibly at the site of Percy's Cross further south and *en route* to Alnwick.

To make the most sense of these associations, it seems most likely that the site of the leap was Percy's attempt to break through the Yorkist forces and escape south to the safety of Alnwick. He was unhorsed, wounded, and pursued. He may have finally fallen at the site of Percy's Cross, fighting all the way. The cross displayed both the badge of Percy and that of Lucie (from Maud De Lucie, mother of Henry 'Hotspur' Percy, Ralph Percy's grandfather).

Despite the defeat, the battle was not decisive — two of the Lancastrian divisions had departed the field intact and relatively unscathed, and would live to fight another day (in less than a month as it turned out). They were, however, seemingly cowed for the moment and retired to the nearby Lancastrian-held castles of Alnwick, Dunstanburgh, and Bamburgh. It is possible that the rapid flight of the Lancastrians was intended to lure the Yorkists in pursuit: if the Lancastrians could divide the Yorkist forces and draw them nearer to the Lancastrian-held castles, they might stand a better chance of defeating Neville's forces piecemeal. There may even have been other Lancastrian forces on an alternative route to block Neville if he had taken that road, and a pursuit in that direction would mean the Lancastrians could combine their forces and then turn on a now outnumbered Yorkist force.

After his victory at Hedgeley Moor, Neville chose not to pursue the defeated Lancastrians however, but continued north on his intended route and met the Scottish delegation. As planned, he then escorted them south again to York. Barrett is confused as to why it took Neville three weeks to march the forty miles (64 km) between Hedgeley Moor and Hexham, but he ignores the necessary diversion of the peace delegation — both to Norham after the battle, back to York after that, and then the return to Newcastle — in addition to the pursuit of the Lancastrians along the line of the Tyne in early May. He did, in fact, cover a great deal of ground relatively rapidly.

It may be for this reason that Barrett dates the battle of Hexham sooner, on 8 May, barely two weeks after Hedgeley Moor. Once the Scottish peace delegation was safely delivered to York, Neville returned to Newcastle to force a more decisive encounter with the Lancastrians. **MW**

Murray Dahm is the assistant editor of* Ancient Warfare *magazine.

FURTHER READING

- Barrett, C.R.B. *Battles & Battlefields In England*. A.D. Innes, 1896.
- Goodman, Anthony. *The Wars of the Roses*. Routledge, 1990.
- Haigh, Philip A. *The Military Campaigns of the Wars of the Roses*. Sutton, 1999.
- Sadler, John. *Battle for Northumbria*. Bridge Studios, 1988.
- Sadler, John & Alex Speirs. *Battle of Hexham in its Place*. Ergo Press, 2007.

An illumination from a fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Alexander Romance*, from Trebizond, showing Alexander the Great and his troops in Thessaly. The work is written in Greek and has marginal commentary in Arabic that was added later.

The *Alexander Romance*

A MEDIEVAL PHENOMENON

Many people today probably know Alexander the Great as one of the most famous figures of the ancient world: a dominant ruler who conquered much of Europe. In the medieval world, however, Alexander was best known as the hero of a sequence of popular romance narratives that told his story in effusive, exciting iterations and enthralled audiences across Europe and the Middle East.

Kathryn Walton

Alexander the Great was born ca. 356 BC. He was the son of Philip II of Macedon (382–336) and Olympias, an Epirote princess. Little is known about his childhood, but he was famously educated by Aristotle. He ascended to the throne upon the death of his father in 336 BC, after which records of his life and conquests are prolific. Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* (which is part of *The Parallel Lives*) is probably the most famous ancient source.

The historical conqueror

Alexander is notorious for the vast amount of territory that he conquered over the course of his fairly short reign (r. 336–323 BC). He began by securing the northern and western frontiers of Macedonia before quelling all rebellion in Greece. He next turned his attention East, and in 334 BC he crossed the Hellespont with an army of roughly 37,000 troops. In the next four years, he won massive victories and conquered the territory of what is now Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt.

He went on from there to conquer vast amounts of land with varying degrees of difficulty. His conquests extended all the way to Northern India, where more than 4800km away from Greece, he turned back to avoid a mutiny amongst troops who would go no further. Along the way and on the way back, he conquered all kinds of territory and brought vast numbers of people under his rule, establishing one of the largest empires in history.

Alexander died in Babylon at only 33 years old. His death came not from defeat in battle, but instead from illness. He fell ill, slipped into a coma, and died on 11 June 323 BC. Although his empire began to fall apart shortly after he died, Alexander is remembered as one of history's greatest conquerors.

The mystery and the interest

Whereas historical sources generally agree on the facts of Alexander's life, they provide differing accounts of his personality. Some offer a more sympathetic and gallant portrait of a great military leader; others suggest he was a monstrous megalomaniac. Whatever he was actually like, there is no question that he attempted to build an illustrious reputation for himself. He took pains to have his life and deeds immortalized by artists and writers. He connected himself with ancient heroes and gods whenever possible, even claiming he was the son of Zeus.

Such a mighty, allusive hero was irresistible for writers of the medieval world, who took these sometimes sparse accounts and crafted rich narratives of Alexander, his life, and his conquests. Alexander's story was so irresistible, in fact, that he appears throughout medieval literary history, in most languages from Europe and the Middle East, and in a wide variety of genres: satire, epic, sermon, history, and romance.

One of the most popular and widespread iterations of his story appeared within the romance genre.

The Alexander Romance

If you are not familiar with the romance genre, romances tell tales of knights and kings going on adventures and quests in search of honour and glory. The structures, styles, and foci of romances are widely diverse; some can be more local with lower stakes (a knight going to rescue a lady); others can see a king or knight defeat great overwhelming evil or conquer vast territories.

Following this generic tendency, Alexander's story was told in many different ways over the course of the Middle Ages. One of my favourite examples comes from late-fourteenth-century England. Called *King Alisaunder*, it tells Alexander's story with all the engaging supernatural flourishes common to the romance form.

The story

This version of the story begins not with Alexander, but with Neptanabus, who was an astrologer/magician struck by the beauty of the queen Olympias. He is summoned to her apartment, and using his skills of astrology, confirms her suspicion that her husband, Philip, plans to abandon her for another wife. He tells her, however, that she will first give birth to a remarkable son who will be fathered by Jupiter. Neptanabus then uses magic to trick the queen into believing in the arrival of the god, disguises himself as Jupiter, and sleeps with her.

Some time later, Alexander is born at an auspicious astrological moment. He is brought up as the son of the king and trained in the court and in battle. Alexander ultimately kills Neptanabus because of rumours that he is his father, which Neptanabus tells him to be true. Alexander, however, proves his worthiness to be Philip's heir by riding the ferocious and wild horse Bulciphal.

After he is crowned as heir, Alexander heads out on his first expedition, fighting Nicholas of Carthage. He kills him in battle and razes Carthage. While he is gone, however, Philip decides to depose Olympias on the grounds of her adultery, and marry Cleopatra of Assyria. When Alexander returns, he is furious at his mother's treatment, starts a fight, chases Cleopatra out of the city, and has his mother reinstated. Alexander is then sent on a few other military expeditions, during which his mother plans revenge against Philip. Philip is murdered by Olympias's lover, and Alexander is crowned as king.

Now king, Alexander embarks on the sequence of conquests for which he becomes famous. He begins by conquering Thrace, then Sicily, then Rome, then Libya. While waiting in Tripoli, an idol in the temple of Jupiter Ammon tells him that Philip of Macedon (rather than Neptanabus) was actually his father, confirming that he is legitimately born.

Meanwhile, Darius of Persia hears that Alexander will not offer him tribute and readies a massive force to face Alexander and his growing army. Alexander marches to Arabia to confront him, sacking many cities along the way, including Thebes. He arrives at the river Tigris, tries to swim across, fails, and has to be rescued. Darius and Alexander then embark on a lengthy campaign of battle against one another. Alexander remains largely dominant throughout, and eventually Darius flees and is killed by two treacherous followers.

Alexander then turns his attention to India. He heads to the city of Porus, and he and his troops suffer greatly from thirst and attacks from wild beasts through the desert along the way. Eventually, he subdues that city, too, and Porus accompanies him across India.

Alexander next turns his attention to Gog, Magog, and Taracun, which he defeats with the advice of an oracle. He then travels through Ethiopia and Egypt before returning again to India. Along the way, he founds a city named after himself, and he defeats Porus in battle, ultimately assuming dominion over all of India. The story ends in Babylon when Alexander is poisoned by a deposed justice. He dies and his body is returned to the city that he founded. He is buried by his men in great splendor.

Romance qualities

As evident from the description above, the romance version of this tale dwells on Alexander's many military excursions and conquests. It also dwells heavily on fictionalized, magical elements of Alexander's life. This is most obvious in the opening section of the tale, which illuminates Alexander's murky childhood with magical mysterious origins. Neptanabus, who is not a historical figure, plays a central role in Alexander's birth and early life, even standing at times as a kind of father figure. This kind of mysterious, supernatural origin story is common to heroes of romance narrative, who, while usually ultimately legitimate, have supernatural elements in their birth stories.

The portrayal of Alexander himself also fits the romance genre. The monstrous megalomaniac of some historical renderings of the conqueror is nowhere to be found; instead, the narrative depicts the king as a noble, honourable, hero. He retains his image as mighty conqueror, but he conquers in a way that mostly aligns with medieval chivalric values.

A transnational sensation

Versions of the story like this one were exceptionally popular across the entirety of the medieval period and across much of the medieval world. The Alexander Romance dates back to Alexander himself, the first rendition of the romance having been purportedly (although probably not actually) written by his own historian, Callisthenes. The earliest extant version of the romance appears in Greek in the third century and multiple iterations in multiple languages appear thereafter: versions survive in Coptic and Syriac; an Armenian version survives from the fifth century; a Latin version survives from the fourth century. These would form the foundation for the later traditions of the text.

That the romance was popular is evident from the English example I described above. This particular complete version of the story survives in three manuscript copies, and *King Alisaunder* would frequently take a prominent, central position, in large expensive manuscripts. Alexander is also often mentioned as a prominent hero in other literary works of the time. The famous English author Geoffrey Chaucer even writes about Alexander in The Canterbury Tales. This gives just a glimpse of the monumental popularity that this narrative enjoyed throughout the Middle Ages.

Why so popular?

The reasons for Alexander's popularity are easy to see. His narrative as a whole is one of extreme human accomplishment and military might, which would appeal to many readers. The wide geographic distances that he traveled introduced readers (not accurately of course) to many areas of the world outside of their own communities and nations. The various plots, trials, and exploits undertaken by Alexander and the other characters offered scope for intrigue and also moral reflection. The supernatural elements allowed for wonders and marvels unseen by readers in their everyday lives to be enjoyed.

And Alexander himself, with his murky origins and convoluted past, was a malleable figure who could be shaped into the kind of hero that the medieval author wishes to present to their audience. He could be held up as a paradigm of learning and leadership or lauded for his impressive skills in battle.

His story provided endless scope for imagination, interpretation, and embellishment, and medieval authors used that core quality to craft narratives that appealed specifically and directly to their audiences. That strategy ensured the endless, ongoing popularity of an ancient historical figure. MW

Kathryn Walton is an Assistant Professor of English at Lakehead University in Canada. She researches medieval romance, magic, and popular culture.

The Viking Eastern Baltic

By Marika Mägi
ISBN: 978-1641890977
Arc Humanities Press, 2019
$18.95
www.arc-humanities.org

The Viking Eastern Baltic is a book in Arc Humanities Press' Past Imperfect series, which is dedicated to concise and accessible historical overviews of different regions, cultures, and traditions of the Middle Ages. This particular title, as its name clearly suggests, focuses on the coastal territories of the Eastern Baltic during the era typically defined as the Viking Age. The region has generally received little more than a passing mention in most books that cover the Viking Age. The tendency is to focus most heavily on the Scandinavian homelands and the Viking expansion west while also providing information about the expansion east through Russia, the Black Sea, and beyond. The territories that must first be passed to reach the rivers of Russia are typically neglected. Consequently, *The Viking Eastern Baltic* shines a rare and very welcome light on this overlooked region.

The book focuses on the cultural milieu and patterns of activity in the region for the period in question rather than, for example, making an attempt to delineate key figures or events. Much of the book is devoted to synthesizing the presence of Scandinavian archeological evidence in the region's coastal communities, the presence of hillforts (coastal and inland), the historical record regarding Viking Age trade routes, and relevant geographical references in saga literature. Additionally, the focus also lies on the territory that comprises today's Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. While touched upon, Finland and Russia's Baltic territories do not receive nearly the same degree of attention in this book.

In five chapters, the book covers the various cultures that populated the area, their interactions, movements, and conflicts, with a focus on eastward activities. *The Viking Eastern Baltic* begins by grounding the reader, offering a good overview of the different groups that populated the region. These can generally be divided into a northern half (Estonia and Finland) populated by Baltic Finns, and a southern half (Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia's Kaliningrad) populated by Balts, with the two meeting and overlapping in Latvia's Courland peninsula. Before delving into the Viking Age proper, the book looks at the pre-viking period, providing a helpful overview of the most significant trade routes in the region that Scandinavians were known to use. The location of certain early Scandinavian colonies are also identified and discussed, such as Grobina in Latvia.

The Austrvegr, as a place and a route, receives a great deal of attention, which only makes sense since it is the "Eastern Way" from the vantage point of Scandinavia. Its pre-Viking origins and growth are discussed, as well as its status as a scene of heightened activity during the Viking Age. Estonia, in particular, takes center stage here, but alternate paths into Russia are also covered, such as the route through the Gulf of Riga and up the Daugava River.

For anyone who is familiar with the Salme ship burials in Estonia (a relatively recent and rare Eastern Baltic discovery that has received a higher degree of attention in a general sense) the section of the book that covers the emergence of a shared warrior culture along the coast of the modern Baltic States will stand out. This section of the book also provides a handful of images of artifacts from warrior graves that display ornamentation directly derived from Scandinavian artistic styles. Furthermore, the text explains how this embrace of Scandinavian ornamental styles appears to have been limited to the warrior class; people from other walks of life tended to maintain their local aesthetic customs.

The book also touches upon the flow of people, including nobles, between Scandinavia and the cities in Russia ruled by Scandinavian descendants during the later stages of the Viking Age. It ends with a brief commentary on the conversion of Scandinavia and Russia to Christianity, and the lingering paganism of the Baltic States. Toward the end of the book, we also learn that raiding continued past the traditional "conclusion" of the Viking Age, particularly in the direction from the Eastern Baltic to Scandinavia. Overall, *The Viking Eastern Baltic* successfully "demonstrates how communication networks over the Baltic Sea and further east were established and how they took different forms in the northern and the southern halves of the Eastern Baltic." Moreover, it reveals that "the inhabitants of present-day Finland and the Baltic States were more engaged in Viking eastern movement than is generally believed."

This is a very informative, accessible book that will be of interest to anyone who wishes to learn more about the pre-Viking and Viking Age history of the Baltic States. **MW**

– Rowdy Geirsson

'The Last Kingdom' is how the author Bernard Cornwell refers to the Kingdom of Wessex in the ninth century, which covered the area of Southern England that managed to resist most effectively the Viking invasions from that time onward. It was from Wessex that King Alfred emerged (848–899) with a vision that paved the way to a united England from its then independent, beleaguered kingdoms.

In this book, the author tells a complex story that incorporates much of the latest research. The text leaves the reader thoroughly educated on the 300-year long assaults of the Vikings and how the conflict that they engendered with the Anglo-Saxon population led to the foundations of the English state.

Alfred is the only English king to be called 'the Great', and he deserves that title. Born to the ruling family of a developing Wessex, he became king in 871 at a time when the Viking invasion of the Great Heathen Army, which had landed in England in 865, was especially threatening. Initially driven by the Vikings into hiding in the marshes of Somerset, he then rallied the militia of surrounding counties to fight back and heavily defeat the Vikings at the Battle of Edington. This was a turning point for his English project.

Alfred was a man of many parts. His strategy of building burghs or fortified towns as he advanced across the south of England served to combat Viking reconquests. These activities also created trading and religious centres. Alfred was deeply religious and encouraged the Church, but also developed education, the legal system, and the use of the Anglo-Saxon language for state and everyday purposes. As a scholar, he translated many books himself. He personified a dream of a united country with all of the constituent states of Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria, East Anglia, and the smaller kingdoms under one rule, incorporating too the Vikings who submitted.

Although he was ill through much of his life (thought to be Crohn's disease), his courage and will power inspired his offspring to move the vision forward. Upon his death, his capable son Edward (c. 874–924) became King and continued to take on the Vikings. In neighbouring Mercia, his sister Aethelflaed, the 'Lady of the Mercians', became a strong, successful leader. Together, they pushed the Viking forces back into central England. Aethelflaed in recent years has emerged as one of the greatest female rulers of the Middle Ages, combining natural leadership qualities with focus on the project that her father had started.

Once Edward and Aethelflaed died, Athelstan, Edward's son (ca. 894–939), became king. Athelstan envisioned a kingdom of all of Britain. He attained control of Northumbria, as well as homage from Scottish and Welsh rulers. When a combination of Vikings, Scots, Strathclyde Welsh, and Norse Gaels forces gathered to invade England, he crushed them at the Battle of Brunanburh (937) and took command of what is now England.

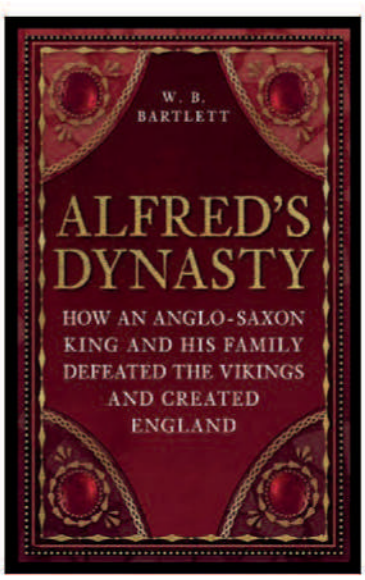
The childless Athelstan died at the age of 45. Aethelfled died at 50, Edward at 51, and Alfred at 50. They all died of natural causes; perhaps a genetic disease or the stress of conflict. The kings who succeeded this dynasty often had short reigns and did not achieve as much, but the structure of a united England endured.

In the year 999, a devastating Viking threat emerged from Denmark. Constant assaults on England were paid off with *danegeld* or sporadically resisted. The hapless Ethelred the Un-raed (meaning ill advised) (968–1016) reigned ineffectually for many years. After, Edward Ironside and the Dane Canute (994–1035) became King of England, Denmark, and Norway. Alfred's dynasty mutated into an Anglo-Danish ruling class. It was this group that faced William of Normandy when he invaded England in 1066. He found there a well organised, wealthy country, with the origins of that stability owing much to Alfred's dynasty.

Alfred's Dynasty, "a tale of scheming, power struggles, conflict and the birth of England as we know it today," makes an enlightening reading for the student of those tempestuous times. Bartlett "tells the story of Alfred the Great and his descendants, and reasserts their right to be regarded as one of history's great Royal dynasties." The book left the present reader with admiration for Alfred, Edward, Aethelflaed, and Athelstan in their great family quest.

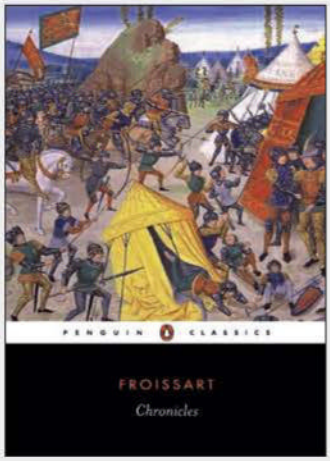
Alfred himself was a leader with courage, iron resolve, and integrity, determined to create a better country for all his people. He battled unflinchingly personal disability and the relentless horrors of the Vikings. Some look for such a leader in our own times. **MW**

– Jonathan H. Jones



Alfred's Dynasty:
How an Anglo-Saxon King and His Family Defeated the Vikings and Created England

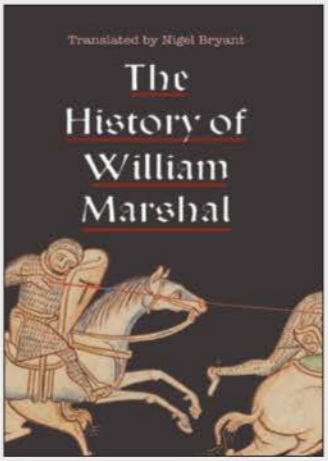
By W. B. Bartlett
ISBN: 978-1398125476
Amberley Publishing, 2025
£11.99 (paperback)
www.amberley-books.com



Froissart Chronicles

Translated by Geoffrey Brereton

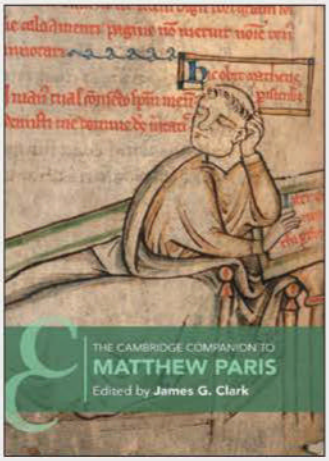
Penguin Classics, 1978
ISBN: 978-0140442007



The History of William Marshal

By Nigel Bryant

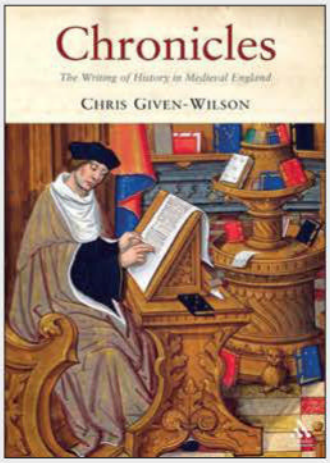
Boydell Press, 2016
ISBN: 978-1783271313



The Cambridge Companion to Matthew Paris

Edited by James G. Clark

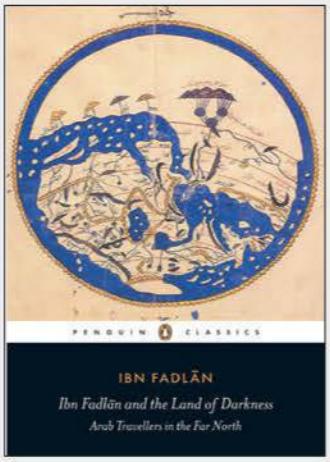
Cambridge University Press, 2026
ISBN: 978-1108461764



Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England

By Chris Given-Wilson

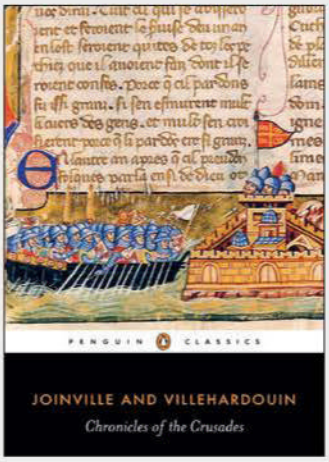
Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007
ISBN: 978-1852855833



Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North

Translated by Paul Lunde et al.

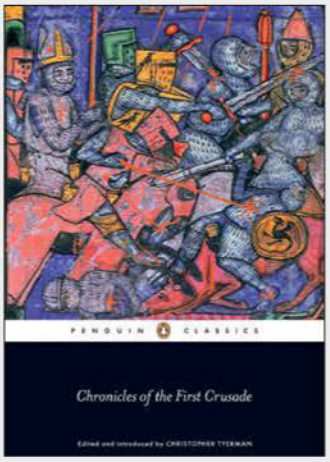
Penguin Classics, 2012
ISBN: 978-0140455076



Joinville and Villehardouin – Chronicles of the Crusades

Translated by Caroline Smith

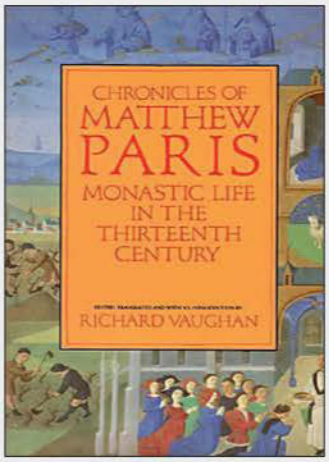
Penguin Classics, 2009
ISBN: 978-0140449983



Chronicles of the First Crusade

Edited by Christopher Tyerman

Penguin Classics, 2012
ISBN: 978-0241955222



Chronicles of Matthew Paris: Monastic Life in the Thirteenth Century

Edited by Richard Vaughan

Sutton Publishing, 1987
ISBN: 978-0862993047

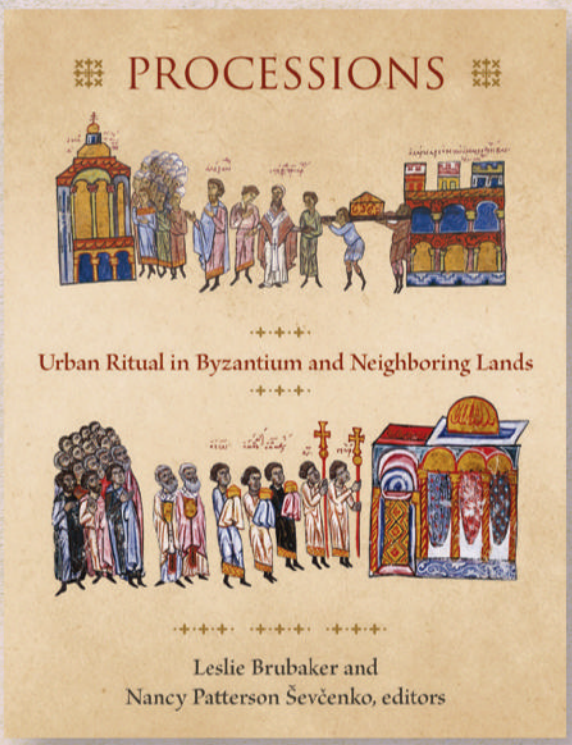
KEY PRIMARY SOURCES

- Herodotus. *The Histories*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Edited by Carolyn Dewald. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- *Philip de Novare: The Wars of Frederick II Against the Ibelins in Syria and Cyprus*. Translated by J. La Monte. Columbia University Press, 1936.
- *Raoul de Cambrai*. Edited and translated by Sarah Kay. Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Villehardouin, Geoffroy de. *La Conquête de Constantinople*. Edited by Jean Dufournet. Flammarion, 2004.
- William of Poitiers. *Gesta Guillelmi*. Edited and translated R. H. C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall. *William, Count of Orange: Four Old French Epics*. Edited by Glanville Price. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975.

OTHER BOOKS, ARTICLES, AND PUBLICATIONS

- Ailes, Marianne. "Early French Chronicle Writing: History or Literature?" In *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, edited by Corinne Saunders and Françoise Le Saux, 25–45. D.S. Brewer, 2004.
- Beer, Jeanette. *Villehardouin: Epic Historian*. *Droz, 1968.*
- Brault, Gerard J. *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition*. Penn State University Press, 1978.
- Bromiley, Geoffrey. "Philippe de Novare: Another Epic Historian." *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 38 (1994): 36–55.
- Dale, Sharon, Alison Williams Lewin, and Duane J. Osheim, eds. *Chronicling History: Chroniclers and Historians in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Penn State University Press, 2009.
- Damian-Grint, Peter. *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority*. Boydell, 1999.
- Edbury, Peter. *John of Ibelin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem*. Boydell, 1997.
- Evergates, Theodore. *Geoffroy of Villehardouin, Marshal of Champagne: His Life and Memoirs of the Fourth Crusade*. Cornell University Press, 2023.
- Gabrieli, Francesco. *Arab Historians of the Crusades*. Dorset, 1989.
- Hanley, Catherine. *War and Combat, 1150–1270: The Evidence from Old French Literature*. D.S. Brewer, 2003.
- Sobecki, Sebastian. *The Cambridge Guide to Global Medieval Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2025.

DUMBARTON OAKS BYZANTINE STUDIES



Processions: Urban Ritual in Byzantium and Neighboring Lands

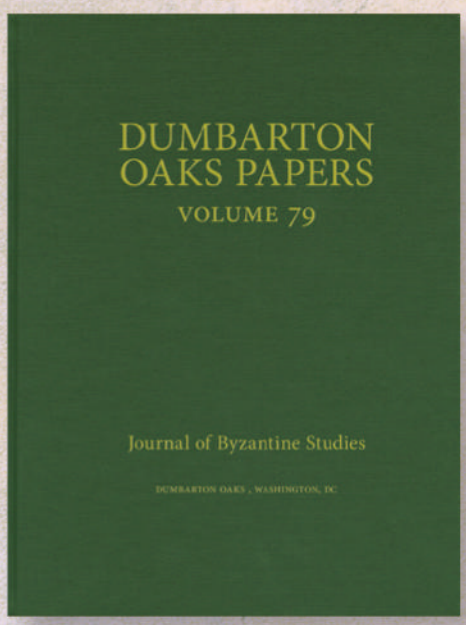
edited by Leslie Brubaker and Nancy Patterson Ševčenko

Now available!

DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIA AND COLLOQUIA

Processions of all kinds—military, civic, religious, and more—were hallmarks of the ancient and medieval world. Yet urban processions in Byzantine culture have never been thoroughly studied, even though there were as many as two processions a week in Constantinople alone, often featuring eminent individuals like the emperor and the patriarch, but also less prominent people, like the teams who decorated the streets. In an introduction and ten chapters, *Processions: Urban Ritual in Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* examines a millennium of medieval processions through analysis of texts, artifacts, and images.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED!



Dumbarton Oaks Papers

Dumbarton Oaks Papers is one of the world's preeminent journals in the field of Byzantine Studies. Published annually since 1941 and now available open access, its articles cover all aspects of society, culture, and art from roughly the fourth through the fifteenth century in the Roman Empire and in successor and neighboring states. Volume 79 (2025) includes articles on Byzantine military manuals, excavations in Ethiopia, the Byzantine telegraph system, and more!

See dopapers.org for more information

For more information, visit www.doaks.org/publications