

Planning at KS3: the problem of 1066

‘The late ninth century saw the first stage of a great formative episode in history, when key elements in society and economy such as villages, manors and towns were created and states were forged.’

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (2002), p.11

Taken in isolation, the Norman Conquest is the ideal topic with which to begin Y7. It’s a fascinating story full of intriguing characters and wonderful for helping students get to grips with using sources and the complexity of causation and consequence.

So what’s the problem? The danger is that over-concentration on the Conquest may lead to significant developments at this time (such as those mentioned in the opening quotation) being squeezed out of schemes of work. This is made more likely by a) a tendency to build schemes of work around events rather than broader developments and b) these developments began in the 9th and 10th centuries i.e. KS2 territory. A start to KS3 built so strongly around a single year - 1066 - is far too abrupt. Even when earlier events are covered they are chosen because they relate directly to the story of the Conquest.

One result of this focus on the Conquest at the expense of broader changes is that it’s likely to reinforce students’ perception that the story of the Middle Ages is essentially one of warfare, ambition and death. Secondly, the omissions mean that an opportunity’s been lost to challenge students’ belief that nothing changed during the stagnant Middle Ages.

So what are these significant developments that were taking place around the time of the Conquest? Grouped for simplicity, they include:

1. The unification of England and development of an efficient administration, enabling good kings to rule more effectively, including regular raising of taxes and the minting of coins.
2. The creation and growth of villages and towns, a revolution in how people lived that was linked closely to the development of trade and the building of roads and bridges. These developments created a landscape that was not changed significantly until the eighteenth century.

3. New ideas, thinking and curiosity which prompted significant religious reform, including the spread of monasteries and building of parish churches, and initiated the development of universities.

The results of these changes were such that if someone from the year 800 visited England in 1200 he or she would be considerably surprised by the nature of the changes – and not just by the presence of a French-speaking aristocracy and by castles. Coverage of these developments, whether before or after teaching about the Norman Conquest, would make clear to students that this was, indeed, a time when significant changes took place.

If you aren't familiar with this period a good starting point is provided on pages 8-9 of *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* where five historians identify what they see as the most significant features of the period c1000-c1350. Phrases such as 'a period of great change' and 'significant change' set the tone and challenge many perceptions of the period.

What questions does this raise?

The problems from a teaching point of view are, however, obvious – such general developments apparently lack the 'wow' factor that's part of the story of 1066 and most of us aren't that knowledgeable about these developments and so don't have anecdotes and examples to create interest and challenge, plus there's that overlap with KS2 territory and the fact that KS3 is already overflowing with content. Despite these points, however, it feels important to ask:

1. Can developments of long-term significance be justifiably omitted from coverage of the Middle Ages at KS3? Not only are they an important part of the story of the Middle Ages but also part of helping students develop their overviews of the past, linking periods together.
2. How could they be taught so that students register their significance? The easy answer is simply to tell students about these things and ask them to read text – that may work for some but not, I suspect, many students. Can students be helped to think for themselves about the interconnections of many of these developments and work out possible links and why they were important? They also need to reflect on how these developments might change their preconceptions of the period.

One route forward, to be explored later in this project, is to ask students to compare the significance of these changes with that of the Norman Conquest. How much of the change that took place between c900-c1200 was really the result of the Conquest?

A little more on those changes!

I began with a quotation from Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (2002). This is a superb book that I'd recommend to anyone who hasn't already read it! By way of conclusion I'll include some extracts from the early pages which tell you a little more about the developments referred to above.

'The pattern of villages and towns which provided the place of residence and work for many medieval (and modern) people was established in the period 850-1100. The basic principles of the social hierarchy, with a dominant aristocracy living on the rents and services of a subordinate peasantry, and a network of exchange based on towns, all owe their origins to this period. The Norman Conquest had economic repercussions, but it cannot be regarded as an important turning point in economic history.' (p.2)

'(it used to be said that) medieval cultivators could not escape from a cycle of falling yields and fields damaged by repeated cultivation because of an inability to improve their technology. Now we appreciate that the period was one of constant innovation, in the use of mills, in the rotation and mix of crops, in methods of drainage and water management, and in the use of draught animals. ... towns were early to develop, became large by around 1300, acted as a stimulus to production, and promoted specialization. The influence of the commercial world penetrated deeply into the countryside, affecting every region and all levels of the social hierarchy.' (pp.5-6)

'It is sometimes believed that the crucial decisions were taken by powerful elites of rulers, aristocrats and merchants. ... More often change emerged from the combination of thousands of uncoordinated actions, involving people at all levels. Formal descriptions of medieval society imply the subordination of the masses. Yet even serfs had some use of property and had some choice in the management of their holding of land, though they were of course restrained in many ways. ... A society that appears to be governed by rigid laws and customs, in reality allowed people to take initiatives.' (pp.8-9)