

# Looking beyond the horizon:

## why we should teach about societies other than English society in the Middle Ages

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What would be the benefits of devoting at least a couple of precious history lessons at Key Stage 3 to studying societies other than English society in the Middle Ages? By that I don't mean a lesson on Scotland and Wales at the time of Wallace and Llewelyn; or bringing in a map of modern France to show the Angevin Empire. These are worthy topics, but I want to focus upon teaching students about different societies and what it might have been like to live in them in the period we know as the Middle Ages.

Let's begin with an example. Which civilisation is this paragraph describing?

That civilisation 'treasured sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities, including extraordinarily beautiful feather work and a literary genre called "flower song". A literary and legal culture supported historians, judges, ministers and clerks. An education system embraced girls as well as boys. Cities ... were masterpieces of urban engineering, architectural harmony and organizational harmony ... centres for festivals and families.'

Did the Aztecs (who flourished c. 1350-c1520) spring immediately to mind? Congratulations if they did because that quotation comes from Matthew Restall's article 'The Aztec Empire: a surprise ending?' in *The Historian* (Issue 134, 2017). What's striking here is the emphasis on sophistication. Indeed, the whole article is a corrective to common modern assumptions about the Aztecs which are still based on accounts by the conquering and self-justifying Spanish invaders and replicated in what Professor Restall describes as 'the errors of fact and interpretation' in books such as Deary's *Angry Aztecs*.

While some schools do teach about other places they may focus on just one other society. There are advantages to such depth studies but detailed knowledge tends to fall out of our brains, whereas teaching about multiple societies in this period could achieve broader aims. Therefore, here are a number of over-lapping reasons for suggesting such work,

concerned both with students' broader historical education and their ability to reflect on developments in England in this period:

- A greater respect for human endeavour around the world and in a range of societies. How have other people in the past lived the experience of our shared humanity?
- Stimulating greater engagement with and curiosity about the diversity of the period. Shouldn't we be fostering a general curiosity and engagement with other societies and where they have emerged from? This would include helping students who may not see their histories reflected in a purely English narrative of the period known as the Middle Ages.
- The 'Wow, I'd never have thought of that!' factor – simply the excitement of discovery and enjoyment of acquiring new and unexpected knowledge.
- Historical context for later studies about people beyond these shores
- Greater awareness of the long story of relationships between human societies, both between other societies and between other societies and Britain. People living on these islands in the Middle Ages had contacts and connections with other societies and by the end of the period they were at least thinking about reaching out even further afield. The consequences of these connections are reflected in modern Britain.
- Comparative work with England, enabling more complex thinking about medieval society here. An insular view of the Middle Ages prevents students from reflecting upon English society by knowing more about its similarities and differences with other societies.

Work on other societies may create a shift in perception about what was happening at this time around the world. A small-scale research project undertaken by Paul B. Sturtevant on the popular understanding of the medieval past suggested that young people may think

that the Middle Ages was just something concerning England. To quote one respondent: 'England is all I think of when I think of this sort of period ... and a bit of Wales.' Do our Key Stage 3 courses do anything to challenge such ideas and help our students have a more rounded sense of the Middle Ages?

### Teaching approaches

Teaching about other societies in the Middle Ages isn't easy, however. Students often have a weak sense of place and period. If we dot about in time and place to the highlights of various cultures, then we can end up with chronological confusion and no idea of location. If we ask narrow questions, then we can end up with isolated knowledge, but no connected understanding. The rest of this article presents a couple of ideas as to how to approach this challenge.

### Suggested places for study

The following cities and regions could be studied in both lesson ideas below.

- Maine (France)                      Helsingør (Denmark)
- Granada (Spain)                      Baghdad
- Augsburg (Holy Roman Empire)
- Nanjing (Ming China)              Delhi (Lodi India)
- Zhetysay (Kazakhstan)              Horn of Africa (Abyssinia)
- Chinchasuyu (Inca)                  Venice
- Constantinople (Ottoman Empire)

### Idea 1: The world in the later 1400s – similarities and differences in how people lived

In one lesson, focus upon a particular moment in time, such as the second half of the fifteenth century. Start

by projecting a map showing the locations of different societies. Then get students working in twos/threes to read case studies of these different societies, from as close as Denmark and also further afield, such as Lodi India. From the case studies students can complete a factfile and a ten-word description of the society they have studied which they then stick up around the classroom.

Once the factfiles are complete, put them up around the classroom. Give students a copy of a chart called 'Collecting information'. It is a way to make sure students read the different factfiles as they go around the classroom to look at them:

Finally, debrief with some careful questioning. (You will want to keep your map projected.) For example, how varied were people's beliefs across different societies? What do students notice about the location of the places that were Muslim and the countries that were Christian? What was the most common way that people were ruled? Which groups of people were most often in control of education? What did richer people usually spend their money on? In which societies would life have been easier for the poor? And, thinking back to their group's initial case study, how connected were places to the rest of the world, which places were developing and getting more powerful, which did not seem to have changed much and which seemed to have declined?

The purpose of all this is to consider human societies at one moment in time with a strong focus upon location. This enables students to consider matters of relationship – connections and contrasts. They should take away understandings such as the geography of religion at the time, the shared experience of autocratic rule, the idea that societies can be in relative ascendancy or decline, and see some of the contemporary connections

Chart A

Factfile for:	
What did people believe in?	
Who had power?	
What were the rulers most concerned about?	
Who controlled education?	
What did wealthy people spend money on?	
How far did people trade?	
How different was life for poorer people?	
How did most people get their news?	
Ten words to describe this society...	

Chart B

Collecting information	
List all the different examples you find. You don't need to list the same thing twice	
Things people believed in...	
Ways people were governed...	
What rulers worried about...	
Ways education was provided...	
Ways that wealthy people spent their money...	
Distances people traded...	
Support for poorer people...	
Ways people got their news...	

in the world at the time. This could be assessed by asking students to write a descriptive introduction to a book called: 'Human societies in the later 1400s'. Alternatively, students could annotate a map of the places with some of their key findings, or develop a key to key features.

**Idea 2: When was the best time to visit...?**

This approach once again uses a map projected to show the locations of various places. In this instance, the lesson is focused upon the points in time when different societies were in their heyday. It again uses case studies, but this time from different, though often over-lapping, time periods, describing societies and also explaining any changes taking place.

Ask pairs of students to produce a sales pitch for their place: Where was it? What date was it? and what features made it so wonderful? Give students an advert sheet with the name of their place and these questions down the side. Get students to complete their advert sheet for their place and then display them around the classroom. Next give students a timeline and send them around the room to read the other sheets and add the name of each place to the timeline at the time when it was in its heyday. When this task is completed draw students' attention to the whole timeline and its changes and continuities. Ask students which factors explain the success of a society and discuss with them what makes a place good to live in. Agree criteria and give pairs a chance to amend their sales pitches before a final activity. This could be a balloon debate, or a simple tally against the criteria. Students pitch for their place and either you, or the whole class, can decide where they would have liked to have lived.

The purpose of this activity is to enable students to consider that human societies have high and low points

at different times and for different durations. If you are going on to study the development of the European empires, this provides an introduction to the reasons for growth and decline of empires and civilisations in general and draws attention to the relative decline of other societies that may have made them vulnerable to European advance.

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**Resources linked to this article**

On the Historical Association website you can find a range of podcasts and pamphlets about relevant world history topics, including the Ottoman Empire and the Incas in the fifteenth century.

For a particularly interesting approach at Key Stage 3 see the article by John Watts and David Gimson in *Teaching History*, 156.

For more about the study of global history relating to the Middle Ages at university level see: <http://globalmiddleages.history.ox.ac.uk/>

For discussion of common misunderstandings about Aztec society and for teaching possibilities: [www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/kids/angry-aztecs](http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/kids/angry-aztecs)

The research by Paul B. Sturtevant can be seen at this link (page 132): [http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1117/1/Paul\\_B\\_Sturtevant\\_PhD\\_Thesis\\_2010.pdf](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1117/1/Paul_B_Sturtevant_PhD_Thesis_2010.pdf)