

# Skills for Medievalists: Week 1 Activity

Webster, H. 'The Annals of Dunstable Priory: From Living Memory to Written Record in a Thirteenth Century Textual Community', *The Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, 9 (2020), pp. 147 – 173.

## A) What type of topics constitute subjects for historical research?

Providing there is period evidence for what is being examined, almost any type of topic can be used as a subject for historical research, from the grandeur and vastness of a nation's history to the specific microhistories of certain locations, peoples, or events. This evidence can come in many forms, but, for the Medieval era at least, most of the evidence is textual, pictorial, or archaeological.

In this instance, Dr Webster focuses on the textual elements of the annals, establishing the authorship and purpose of the written source, as well as concluding that the text is an original work due to the repetitive additions and foresight it offers instead of a copy of an earlier version written source. That said, and Dr Webster does go on to acknowledge this in their conclusion, they could have equally focused on a number of other aspects put forward in the *Annals*, for instance the economic factors in the Medieval period through its accounts of prices and exports, or a social historical approach based upon the issue of the monastery's stores running out of alcohol, all of which demonstrates the diversity of subjects that historical research can take.

## B) How academic research and writing is put together?

Regarding the nature and format of academic research and writing, Dr Webster expands on the written aspects of the text and focuses on its use as a historical account, demonstrating the connections and relations the priory had in its wider community, both on a local level around Dunstable and on the national and international fronts. The building up of a sustained argument and the context behind a text, individual, or idea, is the main way in which academic research should be put together, as by doing this, an academic is ensuring their work continually builds upon what they have previously outlined and does not become repetitive, as well as explaining potentially important aspects of the wider historical perspective that could have influenced the original writers.

Continuing from this, another aspect of how research into a historical source should be composed is that the source should be cross-referenced, a concept that Dr Webster suggests the purpose of the *Dunstable Annals* was. This is important regarding academic research as the academic needs to

assess the validity of there source by cross-referencing it with other sources, whether that be pictorial, archaeological, or textual. If a source was found that did not pass being cross-referenced with other sources, then it would become clear that the questionable source was not valid. That is not to say that such a source would not be interesting to analyse however, as there may be reasons in its authorship or purpose that explain its inaccuracies, but this demonstrates more how almost anything can be used as a type of subject for historical research rather than how academic writing should be put together.

As Dr Webster's work has demonstrated, historical writing should be composed in such a way that a strong line of argument can be maintained while not becoming repetitive, contextual information possibly imperative to understanding the origins of the original source are outlined, and that the source is cross-referenced with other period accounts in order to assess the validity of the source in its wider use.

## **Bibliography**

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