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# Middle Ages for Educators

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## Abstract

The website *Middle Ages for Educators* was created in the spring of 2020. It was designed for teachers, students, and any members of the broader public who want to learn about Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (c. 300-1500 C.E.). It provides resources for both teaching and research, including short videos by world-renowned experts accompanied by discussion questions and primary source materials, introductions to medieval digital projects, workshops on how to use digital tools to study the medieval past, and curated links to associated websites with medieval content, images, digitized manuscripts, or other medieval materials. This article discusses the history, present use, and future goals of the website. It explains how it was founded, its evolution, and how and why it arrived at its current home at Princeton University. It offers examples and links of the various resources found on the site, and finally reflects on the place of the website in the current and future teaching of medieval studies, in and beyond the universities.

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## Introduction

The experiences of the past few years of the COVID-19 pandemic have made painfully clear the importance of access to curated resources for teaching and learning. Even before the pandemic, medieval studies, like so many fields in the humanities, struggled with shrinking majors and enrollments at the university level. K-12 education has faced even greater challenges, with few opportunities and resources to include medieval studies. Medievalists in particular face high barriers to accessing and sharing knowledge about the fields we study because our sources can be difficult to access even in “normal” times. The pandemic did not create these problems; it did, however, make the need to seek solutions more glaring. The move to online modes of communication and digital teaching methods worldwide during March 2020 was a difficult moment for all educators, but one with some important lessons for medievalists that can be a great step forward for medieval studies in the United States and further afield.

It is all too easy to remember the incredible difficulty of the transition, often overnight, to virtual learning in the spring of 2020. Many university educators had little experience with teaching online, and administrators were overwhelmed and unfamiliar with how different online and in-person teaching are. Few teachers received sufficient guidelines about how to teach online, while logistical and technological support was practically non-existent at first. Even when help was offered, library and archive closures, as well as shipping delays and shortages, made evident the real need for help with access to teaching and learning materials.

*Middle Ages for Educators (MAFE)* was created in the midst of this chaos in March and early April 2020 to address the need for online medieval resources and to help facilitate online learning. *MAFE* is designed for teachers, students, and the public who want to learn about and teach Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (c. 300-1500 CE) across Eurasia and beyond. The site has a variety of materials for different types of users: introductions to digital medieval projects, workshops to introduce digital tools, and curated information about other websites of interest to medievalists. The website has original, innovative content, from mini-lesson plans for undergraduate courses, to curated digital sources for graduate students to research medieval topics more efficiently. The website has multiple audiences in mind, including the broader public, and continues to evolve. *Middle Ages for Educators* is the first centralized website built to house digitally-rich pedagogical content for medieval studies.

Moving forward, the question for all medievalists, including the *MAFE* co-editors, is not whether to incorporate digitally-based materials in their classroom but rather how to make efficient use of what is already available. While in-person approaches to teaching will certainly continue to flourish, new approaches that promote active, hands-on learning can enhance traditional pedagogical models. Medieval studies can and should incorporate digital pedagogical tools and practices using the variety of forms that *MAFE* offers, but the question remains as to the best way to approach this process.

## Foundation and Re-Design of *MAFE*

Largely by chance, three people co-founded *MAFE* in just one month, starting during the early days of lockdown in March 2020. What we did not know at the time was that the three of us – Merle Eisenberg, Sara McDougall, and Laura Morreale – had complementary skillsets and, just as importantly, were at different places in our careers that helped facilitate a constructive conversation

about what teachers and learners alike needed, and what we could each bring to the table to help. Sara is a tenured faculty member at the City University of New York, where she teaches all levels of students, with many from the poorest and least well-resourced communities of Greater New York, and she researches late medieval French history, especially gender, law, and sexuality. Merle was, at the time, a postdoctoral fellow at the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center in Annapolis (now he is an assistant professor of history at Oklahoma State University) and is an early medieval historian but specializes in, among other topics, the history of diseases and pandemics. Given his background, he was able to facilitate the considerable upsurge in content users wanted on medieval disease, medicine, and pandemics. Finally, Laura has worked with a number of medieval centers in the U.S., has extensive experience with digital medieval studies, and has held leadership positions at Digital Medievalist and is the Chair of the Digital Humanities and Multimedia Studies Committee of the Medieval Academy of America (where she also serves on the governing Council). Laura is a historian as well, with a focus on late medieval Italy, French-language writing outside of France, and digitized manuscripts, which were in high demand during the pandemic since no one could physically see a manuscript while in quarantine.

As she often does when it comes to research and teaching, Sara had deliberately asked a provocative question on Twitter on March 18, 2020: was there any way medievalists could come together to help each other in the sudden change to online-only teaching that spring? Sara threw out – hypothetically at first – the idea of a teaching-focused medieval studies website as a place where medievalists might find useful content, so every single teacher did not have to create bespoke video content from scratch for their students with neither the pedagogical nor the technical expertise necessary. Naively doomscrolling Twitter that day, Laura and Merle replied within 15 minutes asking for more information, leading to a series of messages and emails back and forth. This is where the idea of *MAFE* was born. Sara’s connections to the broader medievalist community were central in this process early on, since neither Laura nor Merle had even known each other before their collaboration started. The venture really began as a need to do something, anything, during those scary, hectic, and traumatic days in March 2020. Medievalists needed a way to reassure each other – and certainly the three of us felt it acutely at the time – that we could not only continue our teaching and research, but also create a broader online network of medievalists even as we were all restricted to our own homes and the “standard” annual events, such as Kalamazoo and Leeds, were not taking place in person.

Thankfully, setting up a website on a crash course schedule is among Laura’s key skillsets, especially if they include groundbreaking research projects and digitally rich pedagogy. She has consulted on a number of similar start-up projects, so knew exactly how to create, market, and expand such a wide-ranging online effort. The site was initially built on WordPress, which offers simple templates and editing software that anyone can use, even with no background in coding or building websites. While Laura’s experience meant the site could easily be set up with little hassle, both Sara and Merle learned how to add content and edit material within hours. Founding a similar site would not take much work for others in the future since the technical skillset to enter the field is low and the only cost is buying a domain name (about \$100). Merle’s experience in publicity and marketing has also helped the project reach a large audience, which in turn promoted its growth.

The original *MAFE* was launched on April 2, 2020 and within three weeks had 6,000 site visits and 2,000 unique users. Contributions and interest arrived daily – hourly even – from across the US and the world to help build the initial version of the website (archived at doi: [10.34055/osf.io/4yedu](https://doi.org/10.34055/osf.io/4yedu)). These contributions have never ceased, but have ebbed and flowed given the time of year and events around the world. Sara’s experience working in a teaching-focused institution has played a key role in testing what content has worked and what needed to be modified. The site slowly evolved based on this feedback from a static repository of useful links for teaching to an active learning site that features videos and lessons. What became quite clear to people who had never taught online before was that the way in which you teach had to change, especially given the additional burdens students and faculty experienced during the spring of 2020. Faculty needed asynchronous but engaging content above all else.

Within three months of the launch it did become clear, though, that the three original founders could not continue the site on their own indefinitely. The interest in it and the time required just to add more links and videos overwhelmed us. This was a good thing for the site, but given that each of us had other research and/or teaching responsibilities, it was impracticable to continue on a volunteer basis. Merle completed his PhD at Princeton and realized the need to both improve the website and create an institutional home for it long-term. He reached out to Princeton’s Director of Medieval Studies, Helmut Reimitz, and its Director of the Center of the Study of Late Antiquity, Jack Tannous, who agreed to transition *MAFE* to Princeton servers and help create a new and improved website.

Princeton’s history as a leader in medieval studies put it in a unique position to ensure the site’s future pedagogically, administratively, and financially. Princeton’s experienced web development team, led by Robert Ivan, helped us re-orient *MAFE* around user experience to facilitate the easier use of the website. Over the course of the fall semester of 2020, *MAFE* was redesigned, retooled, and reshaped into its current form. Even though it is no longer a simple WordPress site, users with little experience can still easily add content, which they have, as new graduate students and postdocs have helped add content over time and expand the site as new requests continue to arrive.

### **Resources and Tools for Educators**

The existing version of the website has a clean appearance and a user-friendly design that allows interested students, learners, and researchers to find what they need by category, resource type or a simple search function. Resources are subdivided either by era – Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages – or by geography – Northern Europe to the medieval Globe – with various combinations in between. The Princeton video hosting system provides greater accessibility, including automatic closed captioning, to allow all users to benefit from its resources. The site has continued to develop and improve first through our video developer, Skyler Anderson, and then a content manager, Jonathan Henry (both PhD graduates of Princeton). In the future, the site aims to tap the broader medieval studies community in Princeton as a way for them to learn new digital tools and skills, along with adding more content over time. What began life as a quick, ad hoc response to the COVID-19 pandemic has become a key resource and tool of medieval studies.

*Middle Ages for Educators* offers wide-ranging and extensive resources that fit all types of users and audiences. Teaching videos accompanied by lesson plans, including primary sources, suggested further

readings, and discussion questions form the core of the site. These videos are ready-made lessons for educators to use in their entirety or to supplement their own teaching; they can be easily adjusted depending on the user's knowledge. As one example, Daniel Smail created a video contextualizing the life of [Alayseta Paula](#) who lived in Marseille in 1348 during the height of the Black Death. Smail offers background on Alayseta's life, images from the inventory of her life's possessions, and describes how her life was affected by the plague in Marseille. This video would be enough for introductory-level classes, but that is not all. Smail also provides the transcribed and translated text of the inventory for upper-level students who can read and discuss it in more detail, or even for graduate students to read the Latin original. His video page offers further readings if anyone wants to have more background about the Black Death, the science behind the plague pandemic or even the historical context.

Given our own pandemic experiences, the website has expanded resources on disease, plague, and pandemics, but it does feature numerous other videos as well. We are particularly excited about a series created by Gina Brandolino and Moira Fitzgibbons, who have generated small, introductory videos that create classroom dialogue about medieval and modern texts ("[Medieval Meets Modern](#)") to encourage students to think about medieval works as conversations with the present. This special series has a number of videos, including discussions about similarities between *Beowulf* and the 1979 movie *Alien* (and its 1986 sequel *Aliens*). In this [video](#), Brandolino discusses using *Beowulf* as a way to think about modern horror movies, whose themes enrich one another when discussed together. The series hosts other topical videos such as "[Medieval Blood Libel and Contemporary American Anti-Asian Racism](#)" by Magda Teter. As Teter explains, both types of racist behavior are linked through ideas about the "perpetual foreigner," showing that no matter how integrated someone might be in their homeland, racism continues. Teter's video links to an earlier resource *MAFE* compiled on [combating anti-Asian Racism](#) (compiled by Michelle Wang in March of 2021, following the murder of six women of Asian descent in Atlanta, Georgia, in that same month), since there is much more work to be done to combat such ideas in the U.S. and around the world.

Thomas Ward at the U.S. Naval Academy incorporated [Seeta Chaganti's video](#), for example, on the dance of death as part of his senior capstone seminar on early modern media. Even though the video was intended for instructors, he had his students watch it, which they then used in their collaborative final project – a course they designed called Parallel Pandemics. He discusses the course in more detail in [The Electronic Sixteenth Century Journal](#). As he related to us, the video material challenged the students to think about the initial months of COVID through the art and poetry of the *danse macabre* while maintaining an awareness of what was different about pre-modern experiences. The video paired perfectly with the suggested primary-source reading, John Lydgate's *Dance of Death*. He also assigned a chapter from Chaganti's book, which invited students to think about the complex relationship between different historical periods by reading the medieval *danse macabre* tradition alongside Lucinda Childs's late-twentieth-century dance piece, *Dance*. Both with its content and with its very form, *MAFE* perfectly answered his course's title: Early Modern Media in the Digital Age.

Given the increased interest in disease on medieval course syllabi, many of these videos and links about disease have been brought together in [a single page](#) on how to teach medieval plagues and pandemics. The lesson plan and the various PDFs have been used in various settings, such as a Denver community college, where students have compared sources and data about the Justinianic Plague (c. 540s CE) with those about the Black Death (c. 1340s), using videos from Dan Smail along with those



Merle himself made. The community college students really thought deeply after watching the heartbreaking video about Alayset, for example, and trying to compare those individual stories to the larger datasets about pandemics that exist. How can we tell stories about the past that focus on individuals rather than large datasets?

The site also offers access to content that can be used to build lesson plans or to aid in research. The heart of this section is annotated links to external sites for other projects on the Middle Ages that are hard to find. As with the video lesson plans, these links are aimed at a wide variety of audiences and are continually updated. Graduate students who want to read original Greek manuscripts, for example, will find a link to and a brief discussion of the French website [Pinakes](#), which lists every single Greek manuscript, its digital location, and its contents. In conjunction with the Princeton University Library, we are also planning on adding an explanatory video on how to use *Pinakes* and other sites, along with tips and tricks for easy navigation. Similarly, *MAFE* offers the details on, the link to, and a brief discussion of the new [digital corpus site on early Christian churches and monasteries in the Holy Land](#).

*MAFE* features a third set of resources, called “Digital Tools,” where users of online resources explain how to build digital pedagogy. Dorothy “Dot” Porter’s discussion of [Digital Mappa](#), which includes a video introduction, links to further resources, and examples of projects that have used the software. Digital Mappa is a way to display, annotate, and publish images of manuscripts that exist online as a way for scholars and students to work with manuscripts they might not be able to see in person. As with *Pinakes*, it widens access to manuscripts through online pedagogy. Students can now work with manuscripts, even if their own college or university library might not have any.

These are just a few examples of the exciting resources *MAFE* offers educators and students to bring medieval studies to a broader audience. Those interested in participating or reaching out to contributors to *MAFE* can also do so through our [“Experts”](#) tab, which lists willing helpers from every field of medieval studies who are interested in giving back to the broader community as well.

### A Future for Medieval Studies

The humanities face an uncertain future in the academy, as majors continue to decline since the 2008 recession, with little indication of what will happen after the pandemic has receded. *MAFE* recognizes that we are at a pivotal moment in medieval studies in terms of access, interest, and the foundations of the field itself. At a moment when humanities departments, especially those in pre-modern history, are experiencing significant cuts and long-term atrophy, *MAFE* can be a way to change how the broader public thinks about the study of the Middle Ages. There are new ways of innovating to expand the presence of online resources to make the humanities more visible, exciting, and attractive for new generations of students. *MAFE* is leading the way in these endeavors, as it offers new tools, resources, and possibilities for undergraduate and graduate students along with the interested public.

But *Middle Ages for Educators* is only a first step into the future of our field. Many undergraduates encounter the Middle Ages only when they arrive on a college campus and know little about the field, so they may not even consider taking a course in the time period. *MAFE* has begun to expand its offerings to high school educators specifically as well, as a way to expand our outreach. Even when the Middle Ages are required in the classroom, such as in New Jersey, there are few resources for high



school teachers that offer material to help fill this massive gap. *MAFE* is now working to expand our content not only to cover these key ideas, but also to offer content specifically aimed at high school learners.

*MAFE* is thus poised to play a key role in the continuing transformation of the American educational sector and, we hope, can become a leader in this effort to remake the humanities. But we cannot do this alone as a top-down attempt to change pedagogy and incorporate new ways of teaching and learning into the classroom. We as co-creators are thankful to our medievalist colleagues for their support in the site's initial phases, and we hope to build upon that success as the project grows and expands. We would love to have readers of this journal – or any other medievalists anywhere – who have used any of the site's resources let us know what has worked, what has not, and what they want the future of *MAFE* to look like. How should it continue to evolve both inside and outside universities and colleges in the future? What do online resources look like in the future now that most of us are back in the physical classroom? How can we use online resources to adjust how and what we teach in the future?