

Magna Carta: Teaching Medieval Topics for Historical Significance

Scott Alan Metzger
Pennsylvania State University

THE MIDDLE AGES are an immensely important era in the Western experience. The thousand years from the “Late Antique” period after the fall of Rome through the growth of the Italian Renaissance and the final collapse of Constantinople in the fifteenth century saw the emergence of social, cultural, political, and economic forces that directly shaped the modern world—the Christian Church, notions of international law and rules of war, transcontinental trade, representative councils, and nation-states. Unfortunately, medieval studies are often marginalized or trivialized in school curriculum. World history is not always a distinct, required subject, and as a result, only a smattering of medieval topics get covered in “World Cultures” or “Global Studies” classes during units on Europe. Even where world history does get its own course, sometimes in the rush to get to modern history, the Middle Ages can be glossed over. As a result, the whole medieval era is sometimes dismissed as “Dark Ages” without relevance to our world today.

Still, the medieval era continues to fascinate millions of people. Consider the popularity of medieval-themed movies like *Braveheart* and *Kingdom of Heaven*, video games like *Medieval Total War* and *Assassin’s Creed*, and numerous fiction novels about the Knights-Templar. This popularity is a double-edged sword. It means that for all the talk about how kids find history “boring” in school, clearly a lot of them are interested

in medieval subjects. But, it also means that in quite a few classrooms, medieval studies get reduced to simplified claims, colorful stories, and disconnected activities. Perennial favorites include drawing castles or cathedrals, looking at weapons and armor, and reading about crusades, plagues, and how generally miserable medieval life must have been. It is not that any of these is unimportant or could not be done well, but often missing are considerations of broader historical significance that stress how the medieval experience connects to wider historical development.

With the approach of the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, the famous charter of rights from medieval England, we have a timely and useful example for considering what a focus on historical significance could look like. This rebellious document abrogated by the English king not long after it was signed represents broader significant issues in the Western experience with connections long after 1215. We gain a better understanding of its historical significance by looking at chronology, context, causation, and contingency. This historically rich way of looking at Magna Carta demonstrates how school curriculum can more meaningfully incorporate medieval studies.

What Is Historical Significance?

History is extremely complicated. The aim is to learn what we can about a past that happened sometimes very long ago through what traces of that past survive to us today. It involves careful analysis, a multiplicity of interpretations, and sometimes guesswork. Without structure, students can find themselves awash in a tide of isolated, confusing pieces of information. It can be difficult to tell what information is connected to what themes, or what themes are connected to what explanations about why the past happened the way it did. Historical significance is the framework that imposes sense on what can otherwise seem senseless to young learners. Not every possible topic or fact can be covered, and a framework for analytical and explanatory power can help teachers and students to identify short-term factors and effects while keeping an eye toward long-term consequences and developments.

Significance in history is a complex and multifaceted concept. In part, it emerges from the way people think about, understand, and make use of the past—encompassing what scholars have called “collective memory” and “historical consciousness.”⁷¹ It also connects to how people conceive and historically situate group identities. “Ideas of historical significance are cultural constructs,” writes educational researcher Linda Levstik, adding that “decisions about what is historically significant have as much to do with what is repressed as with what is recollected.”⁷² Hence, there is an

unavoidable selectivity that can result, as Levstik fears, often in sanitized narratives of unity and progress in the name of national identities. However, selectivity can yield more incisive, critical results when educators engage students in identifying and analyzing wider historical perspectives and long-term themes. Assessing “the significance of events, changes and people in the past encourages the exploration of the range of ways in which the past has significance for adolescents and their education,” concludes British history educator Martin Hunt;³ this emphasis will help students “understand the physical world around them” and why it came to look and function the way it has.⁴

Significance in history revolves around factors that: 1) point to connections between past events and subsequent major developments, and 2) are essential to long-term explanations of why the past happened the way it did. When historical studies are reduced to a fragmented parade of names and dates, a very reasonable response from young learners is “so what?” or “who cares?” A meaningful focus on historical significance addresses the “so what?” question. Historical significance can guide a teacher in selecting topics, choosing supporting information and sources, and designing activities that engage students in higher-order thinking (using examinable explanatory or interpretive generalizations) about the past, what happened and why, and connections to our world today.

How can we get a sense for historical significance in practice? What might it look like when applied to a medieval topic in the classroom? Below, I discuss four essential elements in understanding history that, taken together, can point the way toward historical significance. For each element, I will describe what it looks like when applied to Magna Carta, informed by some recent historical literature on Magna Carta and the High Middle Ages.⁵ Cumulatively, the four elements provide a fuller picture of the relationships between King John, his realm, his people, and his world that led to the creation—and outcomes—of Magna Carta.

Chronology

Perhaps the most basic essential element in understanding history is *chronology*—the order of past events in relation to each other and broader historical forces. For a long time, schools have asked students to learn (even memorize) the dates of important events. Medieval history, with its chronicles of reigns and battles, is potentially very prone to this approach. The “timeline” of names and dates along a linear axis is a perennial favorite classroom activity. Dates and timelines can be useful, but only to the extent that they help learners visualize the order of and connections between distinct but related events. When lessons do not connect dispa-

rate events to broader historical movements and thematic issues, students may flounder in a sea of names and dates whose collective importance remains obscure to them, with the result that their understanding comes to emphasize the merely consecutive over the interconnected.

Consider a typical school unit about the Middle Ages. English political history and Magna Carta are very likely to be a part. If students are hit with a smattering of disconnected famous dates—1066 and all that—significance may be lost. Historical significance is built through how the order of major events connects Magna Carta to the wider world. Thus, the chronology around Magna Carta needs to take a wider view:

- 1066–1086: Norman conquest of England, from the battle of Hastings through the compilation of the Domesday Book
- 1096–1291: Main period of the crusades, from the call to arms by Pope Urban II through the fall of the last stronghold Acre
- 1189–1199: Reign of King Richard the Lionhearted; Richard also was able to put his nephew Otto IV on the throne of the German empire at this time
- 1189–1194: John gained a reputation for treachery, joining his brother Richard's rebellion against their father Henry II, attempting to seize control of the kingdom when Richard was captured coming back from his crusade, and betraying his alliance with French King Philip II when Richard was ransomed and returned to power
- 1199–1216: Reign of King John; John continued England's alliance with Emperor Otto IV
- 1204: Death of King John's powerful and respected mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine
- 1208–1213: Pope Innocent III put England under interdict and excommunicated King John over whose candidate would become archbishop of Canterbury; John was reconciled with Rome only after accepting the pope's candidate and submitting his kingdom as a papal fief
- 1214: French King Philip II defeated Otto IV and his Flemish allies at the battles of Bouvines
- 1215: Rebellious barons compelled King John to sign Magna Carta
- 1216–1217: Failed invasion of England by French prince and heir Louis
- 1216–1272: Reign of John's son King Henry III; Magna Carta was reissued after another baronial revolt in the late 1250s
- 1290s: King Edward I was compelled to confirm Magna Carta; this era saw the beginnings of a representative Parliament in England

While there is obviously still a linear flow here, we see 1215 not as an isolated date to be memorized, but as part of an unfolding historical process that linked England to events and conflicts in the broader medieval world. The emphasis is shifted from merely consecutive to interconnected movements, moving away from a reflexive fact-after-fact, chapter-section-after-chapter-section organization and toward a focus on historical significance. In this sense, chronology is a tool to be used to help students gain a broader vantage point for seeing historical events. There is little value in rote memorization of chronology divorced from application.

Context

Building on this broad view of important, interconnected chronology is another essential element in understanding history—*context*. This refers to interrelated background conditions (social, economic, political, military) that influence, provide meaning for, and explain specific cultures and eras—in other words, the unique characteristics and circumstances that define a place or period. Historian David Lowenthal has famously described the past as like a “foreign country” to people in the present.⁶ Educational researcher Sam Wineburg calls historical thinking an “unnatural act” because of how strange the past can seem to us today.⁷ Their observations remind us why rigorous historical understanding is difficult, especially for young learners. It is tempting to look at the past as weird or freakish. Without considering context, a natural reflex for students is to dismiss people in the past as just stupid, evil, or somehow defective compared to us today. Important contextual information helps inform why a society operated the way it did. Of course, given the massive depth of medieval studies, teachers walk a tricky line between too much and too little context—overburdening students with detail or oversimplifying a complex past. Perhaps the trick is to focus on contextual information that helps students consider how people in the era would have seen, judged, and experienced their own world.

Typical school units on the Middle Ages often focus on certain details with relish—plagues, violence, superstitions, kings, and popes. Sometimes, the result can be history-as-freak show (even false mythmaking). Rigorous historical understanding, though, depends on manageably using important (and accurate) contextual details to explain historical periods and events. Useful context for the Anglo-Norman world of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries identifies important background conditions for Magna Carta:

- Norman rule in the two centuries after 1066 gradually brought notions of serfdom and village economies to England. This shift across much of the island from scattered homestead to village-based agriculture

unleashed new economic challenges—traditional fixed rents and feudal labor obligations often were not enough to keep pace with the expenses of rising standards of living suitable for the nobility. Some nobles found their independence and power threatened by debt, often to Jewish moneylenders under the king's toleration.

- Hundreds of new towns were founded in England in the two centuries after the Norman conquest, many by royal charter. Trade-oriented towns provided a rapidly growing economic and political base that kings could turn to separate from (though not wholly independent of) the nobles and the Church.
- Norman rule brought “forest laws” to England, harshly restricting land use at a time when the population was growing. “Afforestation” covered up to three-quarters of England by the late 1100s, and fines (of those whose use of their land for hunting, timber, building, or agriculture crossed into a forest zone) provided considerable sums for the royal treasury.
- English kings held in ward (“in the king's gift”) widows and underage heirs to important feudal estates, profiting from those lands as long as they were kept. Kings used wardship of heirs or remarriage of widows as a way to raise quick funds or give patronage to influential supporters. Nobles often had to go into the king's debt to buy marriage to a wealthy widow.
- Personal reputation was essential to medieval rulers. John's reputation for treachery led many people not to trust him. When Arthur of Brittany, John's nephew and rival claimant to the throne, mysteriously died after being captured in 1202, many people thought King John a murderer. John's mistreatment of hostages and war captives further hampered his reputation.
- Nationalistic notions of England and France did not yet apply. Many in England also spoke French. Some powerful nobles had land holdings in both England and France and owed fealty to the English and French kings at the same time. English and French kings were constantly at war over competing claims to feudal territories in Western Europe.
- In feudal England and France, kings depended on their nobles to provide armies of knights (usually cavalry) and “sergeants” (medieval infantry). Raids, ambushes, and sieges were the most common military activities, because fighting large field battles required a massive commitment of political and military resources on a very risky outcome. Hence, when big set-piece battles were ventured, they often were decisive and viewed as a verdict from God.
- Going on crusade (“taking the cross”) served as a convenient alternative for nobles who did not want to support their king's military adventures. Kings sometimes promised to go on crusade as a way to enhance their reputation or attempt to make peace with the Church or rival rulers.

All of these contextual details play an important role in helping students understand what Magna Carta is and why it was created. Notice how much of this context ties closely to the richer consideration of chronology above. These two essential elements operate most profitably in close proximity.

Causation

Chronology and context together pave the way for the most complex essential element in understanding history—*causation*, the chain of events or connected influences that shape or cause particular historical outcomes. In a nutshell, causation addresses the question, “Why did the past happen the way that it did?” Lessons that do not consider causation only ask students to memorize *that* history happened—not to learn *how* or *why*. Meaningful learning about history suffers without examining the how and why behind major movements and turning points.

School lessons about Magna Carta are a perfect example for historical causation. Why did Magna Carta happen? Why did it take the form that it did? Why was it important so many centuries later? Drawing on what we learn from chronology and context, important causal relationships emerge:

- Economic developments since the Norman Conquest as well as royal taxes and fines caused debt and economic dislocation for some and rapidly rising prosperity for others. Towns had to pay for their charter privileges (a tax called “the farm”) and faced royal duties on port trade and many local markets. Some powerful nobles were badly in debt to King John due to high charges to marry widows in his keeping or exorbitant inheritance taxes (called “reliefs”) on land estates. Economic uncertainty and competition over who would get the biggest pieces of the pie of English wealth caused some disaffection in England by 1215.
- Almost everybody but the royal treasury suffered from how royal forest laws were exploited. During Richard and John’s reigns, many counties banded together to buy “disafforestation” from the crown. This led to a sense of community action by 1215 and experience negotiating with the king against unacceptable policies.
- The death of John’s respected mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, in 1204 removed a moderating check on his relationships in France. Few nobles trusted or esteemed John personally. This caused many French nobles to renounce loyalty to John and go over to French King Philip II. John soon lost control over most of his territories in France, notably Normandy. The loss of his ancestral homeland was a major blow to John’s prestige, strengthened the hand of King Philip, and weakened John’s military position in France.

- Conflict with the papacy made John more in need of financial, political, and military support of towns and nobles right at the time he was in danger of losing it. Several times between 1202 and 1214, large numbers of nobles refused to provide troops for his war in France. Some nobles chose to go on crusade as a way not to support the king without openly opposing him.
- John's lack of reputation and loss of position in France put him on course for open conflict with Philip II. John's attempt to regain his position in France by seeking a decisive battle in conjunction with German emperor Otto IV backfired: Philip's strength had increased while John's had fallen. Philip's victory over Otto at the battle of Bouvines forced John to retreat to England, sealing his weak position.
- Nobles dissatisfied with John's rule went into open rebellion after Bouvines. Even the royal capital London turned against King John. In the terse conclusion of James Holt, "The road from Bouvines to Runnymede was direct, short, and unavoidable."
- Because there was not a legitimate adult alternative for the rebels to place on the throne, their negotiations had to embrace the cause of the whole realm. As a result, Magna Carta contained something for most societal groups: powerful nobles, landowning knights, noblewomen, child heirs, farmers, towns and traders, and people everywhere resentful of King John's reliance on abusive mercenary troops.
- King John's restored standing with the Church allowed him to ask the pope to annul Magna Carta. This caused the rebels to offer the throne reluctantly to the French Prince Louis. However, John's death brought his son Henry III to the throne under a regency of influential, respected nobles like William Marshal. The regency government reissued Magna Carta, and Louis was forced to retreat the next year after support for him in England quickly faded.

Causation inherently focuses on "big picture" issues in history. This can be daunting, especially for teachers who work with young learners. It is easy for children to get lost when studying complicated subject matter and doing more than memorizing one right answer. Hence, teaching causation requires that teachers provide careful support for student thinking and model what it looks like to explore the how and why of the past.

Contingency

Closely related to causation is *contingency*, the possibility that history did not have to turn out the way it did, that different conditions or events could have led to radically different outcomes. "Contingent" interpretations of the past ask "what if things had been different?" Imagined alter-

ative historical outcomes (called “counterfactuals”) provide a different way of thinking about causation, looking at factors and causes from the other direction. Magna Carta offers several intriguing counterfactuals:

- What if any of John’s three brothers had lived to reign into the 1200s? Was the rebellion that led to Magna Carta something only King John would have faced?
- What if John and Otto IV had been able to join forces and beat Philip II at the battle of Bouvines? Would a restoration of John’s position in France have prevented the rebellion that brought about Magna Carta?
- What if John’s heir in 1216 had been an adult and not needed a regent? Would Magna Carta have been reissued or forever squelched?
- What if John had not died in 1216? Had he either won the civil war or been replaced by Prince Louis, would Magna Carta ever have been reissued?

Of course, it is important not to get carried away and turn this into a fantasy game. Certain historical forces and details (the context) could not have been different. Contingent thinking about the past is best when it explores what realistically could have been different and how those differences might have led to alternative outcomes and long-term developments.

Historical Significance of Magna Carta

If we take chronology, context, causation, and contingency together, a sense of historical significance is the product. For Magna Carta, the historical significance of its legacy in the development of Western representative government becomes central. We see differences in the charter’s short-term purposes and effects and long-term meanings and consequences. In its short-term purpose as a negotiated document to prevent civil war between King John and his barons, Magna Carta was a failure. Within less than a year, John renounced it, the pope annulled it, many English nobles mobilized for war regardless, and some rebels went so far as to invite a rival French prince to take the English throne. Yet within this failed peace agreement laid seeds for something more important and long-lasting. John’s convenient death brought his underage son Henry to the throne with the powerful and famed William Marshal as regent. Reissuing Magna Carta was a useful way to undercut support for the French claim to the throne.

In the long view, Magna Carta became an agreement for just and limited government, its principles reconfirmed whenever a regime needed to attest its rightness to rule. Hence, during another civil war five decades after

Magna Carta, Simon de Montfort's rebel government resurrected Magna Carta. King Edward I, even though he had previously defeated Montfort and restored his father's throne, nonetheless reconfirmed Magna Carta to keep domestic tranquility during his own reign—the period when the beginnings of a permanent representative Parliament emerged. Magna Carta became a source for “traditional English liberties” when Parliamentarians like Sir Edward Coke criticized abuses of royal power in the early 1600s. Again, in the 1760s through 1770s, Magna Carta crossed the ocean to serve as a legal basis for the American colonies' resistance against King George III and their demands for representative government. By considering historical significance in the short term and the long view, medieval topics like Magna Carta become much more important than just an isolated old date to memorize.

Historical Significance in Lessons about the Middle Ages

In closing, let me offer a few ideas for lessons that could be used in the classroom to teach medieval studies with a focus on historical significance. Magna Carta serves as the example here, but the ideas can be applied to any other historical topic.

To engage with chronology more meaningfully, students can construct deep timelines—as long as the depth and complexity are kept to an age-appropriate extent. Rather than a line of discrete, seemingly unrelated events, a deep timeline incorporates descriptive information of major contributing forces or turning points to a thematic issue (such as “medieval law and government” or “representation and limits to royal power”). A deep timeline also should have more than one axis, incorporating multiple regions or time frames. For example, a deep timeline around Magna Carta could have an axis for broader social developments in Britain as well as an axis for events on the continent affecting England.

Context can be explored more richly by analyzing Magna Carta itself as a primary document. Specific language, terms, and rhetoric recorded in the charter reflect particular societal factors and conditions. After being prepared by their teacher to understand terms like afforestation, wardship in the king's gift, reliefs, and mercenaries, students could look for them in the document and interpret how they are used and why.

For causation, teachers can organize student-run “panel discussions” on an issue of significance. For example, “Why did Magna Carta happen, and what were its effects in 1215 and since?” Using content knowledge learned, students would prepare responses, take turns sharing them in their panels, and respond to each other's interpretations. The teacher would need to circulate among the panels, supporting students to share their

ideas, encouraging the listeners to offer informed responses, and rewarding students who participate actively.

Contingency can be experienced in a “counterfactual” simulation—coming up with alternative historical possibilities and reasons why they could have been likely. Teachers can break classes up into small teams, each tasked with creating an alternative “story” for 1215 and developing a list of reasons why it is plausible. These counterfactuals can also be illustrated in poster projects and shared with the whole class. Once all counterfactuals are presented, the different teams can take turns asking questions of each other about the reasonableness of the alternative stories. Each team would need to use learned content knowledge to point out possible weaknesses or to support the plausibility of the alternative counterfactuals.

It may be difficult to find time for these kinds of activities in an era of high-stakes achievement testing, but the topics stressed and connections made can be intentionally structured to relate to specific academic standards and benchmarks. That way, the time spent on such activities is not a distraction from meeting standards but a visible reinforcement. Ultimately, the purpose of history education is to develop in young people the ability to engage in higher-order thinking about the past and its connections to our world today. This involves some discipline-based notions of history (evidence, analysis, interpretation) as well as notions of heritage (cultural continuity, long-term consequences, legacy). It is difficult to imagine a well-informed academic understanding of, or respectful heritage for, the Western experience without the Middle Ages. Selecting and implementing medieval topics in the classroom with an eye toward historical significance has the potential to reach the twin goals of academic history and heritage.

Notes

This article is based on a paper presented at the Center for American Heritage Studies conference “Magna Carta and the World of King John” at the Pennsylvania State University. Special thanks to David Saxe of the Center for American Heritage Studies and Vickie Ziegler of the Center of Medieval Studies for their support. Additionally, the author wishes to acknowledge Carla Peck from the University of Alberta and Peter Vinten-Johansen from Michigan State University for sharing helpful insights.

1. Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
2. Linda Levstik, “Articulating the Silences: Teachers’ and Adolescents’ Conceptions of Historical Significance,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National*

and *International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 284.

3. Martin Hunt, "Teaching Historical Significance," in *Issues in History Teaching*, ed. James Arthur and Robert Phillips (London, U.K.: Routledge, 2000).

4. *Ibid.*, 52.

5. See Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: And the Beginnings of the Modern World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006); David Crouch, *William Marshal: Knight-hood, War and Chivalry, 1147-1219* (London, U.K.: Longman, 2002); Danny Danziger and John Gillingham, *1215: The Year of Magna Carta* (London, U.K.: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003); James Clarke Holt, *Magna Carta*, second ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Alistair Horne, "The Battle that Made France," *Military History Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2000): 88-97; Jana K. Schulman, ed., *The Rise of the Medieval World 500-1300: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002); Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

6. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

7. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).