

H-France Salon

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Introduction to H-France Salon on Dividing up the Past: Thinking about Periodization in Medieval and Early Modern Francophone History

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How do we divide up the past? What are the boundaries that separate one period of study from another? Historians and literary scholars are extremely conscious of the ways in which periodization – our ever-shifting effort to organize past events – obscures as much as it highlights. Every attempt to divide and label historical periods is fraught and reveals political intent.¹ And yet, we cannot do without periodization; any professor who teaches a survey class understands the need to arrange and categorize the past to impose clarity and order for students trying to understand connections among historical events. The students themselves expect to see clearly labeled and defined historical eras, convinced that only a chronological or diachronic-based class will give them the tools to understand the discipline under study.

The demands of scholarship are different from those of the classroom, but in both cases, the stakes are high because of the ways in which various periodization schemes serve to foreground certain events at the expense of others. The boundaries we choose operate in a fashion similar to the “vanishing point” in a painting, as Helmut Walser Smith explains in an evocative essay, as “a focus of research that structures the whole image . . . dictating the questions we ask and the issues we debate.”² So for example, in an excellent *French Historical Studies* forum published in 2011, a number of historians (including Daniel Lord Smail, who participated in our discussion) reflects on the problem of “the flattening of history or the telescoping of historical time.”³ This telescoping, he suggested, has led historians to disengage from our deeper past, with particular implications for medieval and early modern historians, whose work has been relegated to a static “historyless” era, as scholars turn their attention to modern events and processes.

For those scholars who study the eras traditionally classified as medieval and early modern, then, these concerns around periodization are existential. Periodization is deeply ingrained in academic life. Job postings in both literature and history reflect this. Even though most ads now give

¹ See Kathleen Davis’s introduction to her important study *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

² In “The Vanishing Point of German History: An Essay on Perspective,” *History and Memory* 17: 1–2 (Spring–Winter 2005): 267–296, here 272, Helmut Walser Smith draws on the analogy of perspective in art to discuss “vanishing points” in modern German’s difficult history, and how the date on which the historian focuses structures the field of study.

³ Daniel Lord Smail, Introduction to “History and the Telescoping of Time: A Disciplinary Form,” *French Historical Studies*, 34:1 (Winter 2011): 1.

latitude to the candidate concerning the scope of their research – “Time period, regional focus, and topical specialization are all open for consideration” is a common formulation – they still, for the most part, specify a temporality for the candidate under consideration, or have one in mind. And while some journals represent a region broadly defined (for example, *French Historical Studies*, *Journal of Southern History*), many others represent a specific historical period (*Sixteenth Century Journal*, *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, *Journal of Modern History*), however loosely defined.

Our current modes of periodization, not surprisingly, lie in the history of history, and specifically in the efforts of European historians to make sense of the past. As proof of how deeply embedded these divisions are, we must make use of them to explain their emergence. One of the contributions of humanist scholars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the development of modern historical thought was a sense of diversity and change over time. Already by 1341, the celebrated poet Petrarch was drawing a sharp boundary between what he called “ancient” and “modern” history, with the fall of Rome as the key moment of rupture.⁴ His humanist successors introduced another subdivision by identifying a “Middle” or “Dark” age between Rome and their own era.⁵ (For more on this, see Éloïse Adde’s contribution to this salon). By the end of the seventeenth century, this division into ancient, medieval, and modern history had become a commonplace in textbooks; with some modification, these are essentially still the broad classifications we use today in the Western world and have been adopted into (or imposed onto) other cultures as well⁶ – although certainly not all.⁷

However, it is the precise boundaries that we give to – and within – these broader divisions of the past that create controversy. Interdisciplinarity and the widening of the historical and regional lens to consider a Middle Ages that expands beyond Europe also has implications for how we think about the slicing up of our historical past. In addition, and of relevance for a salon session aimed at scholars of France, the American, British, and French (and other!) academic systems have different ways of conceptualizing and labeling the past. On the French website lelivrescolaire.fr, which offers online manuals for various disciplines at the *lycée* and *collège* level, the history book for *seconde* – roughly the equivalent of the American 10th grade – starts with a chapter entitled “Histoire, périodisation, représentation du temps.” Its introduction states that “en France, l’histoire est découpée en quatre grandes périodes : l’Antiquité, le Moyen Âge, l’époque moderne et l’époque contemporaine.” The text goes on to explain that “Ce découpage n’est pas neutre: il est né d’un rapport particulier à notre passé, ainsi que de choix consistant à mettre certains événements en valeur. Chaque société construit son propre rapport au passé et au

⁴ Theodore E. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” *Speculum* 17:2 (April 1942): 226–242, here 233.

⁵ Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” 241.

⁶ On this point, see Daniel Woolf, *A Concise History of History: Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 106, 205, 211.

⁷ For example, scholars of indigenous studies challenge traditional Eurocentric forms of periodization; Katherine Binhammer argues that the emphasis on periodization in her field – eighteenth-century studies – “is anathema to indigenous modes of knowing.” See “Is the Eighteenth Century a Colonizing Temporality?” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 33:2 (Winter 2021): 199–204, here 199. For a discussion of this in the medieval context, see Tarren Andrews (Bitterroot Salish), “Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts: An Introduction,” *English Language Notes* 58:2 (October 2020): 1–17.

temps en fonction de la façon dont elle se pense elle-même.”⁸ And indeed, Jules Michelet, in the medieval volumes of his monumental *Histoire de France*, presents the period in the context of the early construction of the French nation. Recuperating these ideas, narratives of power and France are intermingled and can be seen as early as the reign of Clovis, as Ernest Lavisse explains: “après son baptême, Clovis devint roi de toute la Gaule. Dans la suite, la Gaule changea de nom. Elle s’appela la France.”⁹ Later, other titular figures of medieval French history were used not so much to illuminate the medieval context, but rather as tokens for the *current* greatness of France. Indeed, Joan of Arc is presented as the tutelary medieval figure whose deeds are still worthy of admiration in the twentieth century: “Jeanne avait sauvé la France; car les Anglais, quelques années après sa mort, furent chassés de notre pays. Tous les Français doivent aimer de tout coeur l’admirable Jeanne, qui mourrut pour son roi, pour la France, pour nous.”¹⁰

This automatic incorporation of periodization permeates the French and English languages; while no longer common in academic scholarship, we still see references in popular culture to the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages,” associating it with a time of violence, despair, and stasis, lacking in refinement and intellectual contributions.¹¹ Popular commentary labels gruesome events, such as massacres, as “medieval” – *c’est le Moyen-Âge* – despite protests from historians, while the term “Renaissance,” a period equally violent, conjures up images of classical learning, refinement, and secular humanism. Enlightenment contempt for all things “medieval” along with the Cold War reinterpretation of Jacob Burckhardt’s work – suggesting that the Renaissance was the seedbed of Western modernity – have served as powerful propaganda for Renaissance enthusiasts.¹²

Today, historians reject the teleological schematization of history promoted by the guardians of France’s past. Scholars more generally recognize the problems with the traditional periodization of French history, given how long it took for the contours of the modern French nation to emerge (an issue of particular relevance in the essay by Indravati Félicité). We are also conscious of the problems with these traditional periodizations of history in a world where the historical project can no longer be solely Franco-centric or even Eurocentric but must encompass a broader framing.¹³ For no scholars are our usual modes of periodization more problematic than for those of the medieval and early modern world. The traditional schema collapses everything between the fall of Rome and Charlemagne, and then leaves a gap; historical events once again become visible in the late tenth century, taking us into the High Middle Ages. In popular culture as well

⁸ <https://www.lelivrescolaire.fr/page/6815493>. In 2017, Patrick Boucheron’s weighty tome, *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017) offered a lively challenge to this traditional periodization, as well as to the Hexagon-centric organization of French history with a collection of essays from a wide-ranging group of scholars whose works, looking back as far as 34,000 B.C.E., span the globe. On the book and its impact, see Pascale Barthe’s review in the *Journal of World History* 29: 3 (September 2018): 406-8.

⁹ Ernest Lavisse, *Histoire de France Cours Élémentaire*, ed. Marguerite Clément and Teresa Macirone (Boston: Heath and Co. Publishers, 1919), 15.

¹⁰ Lavisse, *Histoire de France*, 85.

¹¹ On the evolution and many meanings of the term “Dark Ages,” see Janet L. Nelson, “The Dark Ages,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (Spring 2007): 191–201.

¹² Randolph Starn, “A Postmodern Renaissance?,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 60:1 (Spring 2007): 1–24. A caution here that the work of Burckhardt focuses on the Italian Renaissance while we are more interested here in the periodization of French history, and that of the French-speaking world.

¹³ A problem that Peter Frankopan addresses in “Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, 1:1 (2019): 5–10.

as the educational system, a rupture, not always clearly defined (the Black Death? the end of the Hundred Years War and Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, both in 1453? the opening of the Atlantic?) marks the end of the dark Middle Ages in favor of the humanism of the Renaissance, which in the French context blossoms in the sixteenth century. The centuries that lack a specific label (for example, the fifteenth century) disappear from the timeline – no journal bears their name – and from class syllabi. To be labeled is to be visible; to lack the same is to be invisible.

But the problem is larger than this and brings us back to the difficulty with “telescoping” history. The label “the Middle Ages” covers nearly ten centuries, yet we envision it as a single period (with some subdivisions, to be sure). Indeed, this is the timeframe for a class that one of us, Christine Adams (a historian), teaches on Medieval Europe. Likewise, the early modern period, which encompasses three centuries, often serves as little more than the backdrop for the coming of the French Revolution of 1789. With 1789, we enter the truly “modern” world (or, as the French define it, the era of *histoire contemporaine*). In today’s world, this is the rupture and the history that matters, for it seems to explain how we got to where we are. The paradox for medievalists and early modernists is that in trying to be “relevant” – which really means “modern” – their world became invisible. The urge to make the “Other” – the unfamiliar – familiar actually takes the “Other” (and what makes it interesting) off the map. And this, as we noted earlier, is an existential crisis in which jobs and resources for “irrelevant” medieval and early modern scholars are disappearing. It is also an issue for scholars seeking an appropriate venue to publish their work. Kay Edwards, in a fascinating analysis of journals that publish medieval and early modern scholarship found inherited classification schemes that reflect methods or periodization dating back to early in the twentieth century, mean that publications with non-traditional periodization can fall between the cracks. Among the best-known venues for French history, periodization, as well as thematic and geographic focus, are often idiosyncratic, in ways that can make it difficult for an individual scholar to challenge traditional modes of classification even in ways that make sense for modern research.

So, periodization is a vexing topic that impinges in a variety of ways on the work and teaching of those of us who study the Francophone world. And yet, to think about it deeply can be an enormously rewarding and creative process and can provide ways to meet the ongoing challenge. To that end, we invited an interdisciplinary group of medieval and early modern scholars to consider the issue of periodization and its implications for their own work. Some were educated in the French system; others are scholars of France, or the Francophone world broadly defined. In May 2022, we met online to discuss periodization. This discussion brought to the fore a host of important questions, including:

- The problems, complications, or simply the structures associated with current periodizations. What do we lose? But also, what do we lose by getting rid of them? This is of particular concern for medieval studies, which are disappearing from some universities (thinking back, once again to the issue of the telescoping of history).
- Do we simply want new ways of periodizing? What would they look like?
- Connected to this: how does interdisciplinarity enrich our approaches and thinking about periodization? Are some disciplines more “natural” fits (or synthetic fits?) for an approach based on periodization?
- How do we periodize or date (or time stamp) things that are not events?

- How do the cultural items of everyday life, e.g., pieces of writing that are not part of a literary or historical canon, play a role in a discussion on periodization?
- What is the impact of different emphases/periodizations in different scholarly/academic systems (French vs. American, for example)? What is the role of the job market in enforcing particular modes of periodization?
- How does a focus on global/world/deep history and literature shake up our ways of thinking about periodization? Why might it also be problematic to conceptualize a “global Middle Ages”?
- How do we read back our current national configurations into the medieval/early modern era? How has it shaped our scholarship – even current scholarship, as we try to be more aware of anachronism? How have the legacies of periodization handed to us by 18th–20th-century scholars shaped our understandings of the past?
- How do current periodizations influence how we think about the “modern”? What does “modern” even mean?

The essays that follow do not necessarily answer these questions but offer reflections on the temptations as well as the problems with our usual modes of periodization from a variety of perspectives. While some are more narrowly focused, all reflect the authors’ own fields of research and the issues they face.

Éloïse Adde’s essay highlights why it is so important for medievalists and early modernists to grapple with these questions: in part, at least, because academia today undervalues both medieval and early modern studies. Her essay calls into question the perceived rupture between the medieval and modern worlds that is at the heart of periodization, a point that others come back to as well. Her work is influenced by Jacques Le Goff’s idea of the “long Middle Ages,” lasting from the end of the Roman Empire until the eighteenth century.¹⁴ In a related fashion, Indravati Félicité’s essay reflects the issues that arise in her research into the Holy Roman Empire and its diplomatic relations with the kingdom of France in the early modern era. She suggests that we need to rethink where the real ruptures in history take place and argues that doing so can help us to avoid teleological thinking.

Tracy Adams’ contribution reflects her frustration with current modes of periodization, in which the late French Middle Ages tends to disappear between the “High Middle Ages” and the French “Renaissance” of the sixteenth century. She offers a case study to demonstrate what we lose when we elide the fifteenth century, notably the emergence of a richer understanding of the complexity of individuals (especially women) and their emotional lives as revealed in the literature of the period. Adams suggests that this silence around the contributions of the fifteenth century is a legacy of Johan Huizinga’s beloved 1919 text, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, which painted the era as tired and lacking in originality.

Sharon Kinoshita, a scholar of the global Middle Ages, also uses a case study to make a larger point. She argues that an expanded geopolitical frame is indispensable to the study of medieval French, given that so many of the foundational texts were set, and in many cases composed, outside the borders of the medieval kingdom of France and/or the modern Hexagon. Her essay

¹⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), esp. chap. 7.

on Marco Polo considers the broad reach of French as a literary language long before French became the lingua franca of early modern Europe. Phillip John Usher, an eco-historian also trained to think globally, forces us to think about history and periodization in geological terms at the same time that he acknowledges the continued importance of periodization in the humanities, both in research and hiring. Like Kinoshita, he also thinks about language: at a time when “The Great Acceleration” is bringing dramatic change to the eco-system in which we live, our language is finding it difficult to keep up.

Anna Klosowska, whose historical, material, and literary interests span centuries, languages, and borders, reflects on the many ways in which she has “erase(d) and redraw(n) period lines and maps” over the course of her career. Her essay riffs on the problems inherent to dividing up and categorizing knowledge – not just problems of period, but geography, language, alphabet, religion, botany, architecture, and material culture. Klosowska’s delight in the varieties of evidence available and her awe at the creative ways in which medieval and early modern scholars from a variety of disciplines use them to reshape our understanding of the past shine through in this essay.

Like Usher and Klosowska, Daniel Smail has long grappled with the concept of history deep and slow, one that draws on the tools of disciplines beyond traditional historical methodologies.¹⁵ But in this essay that brings our salon to a close as he muses on efforts to date things inherently undatable, he moves from universal understandings of history to the local, the provincial, and, *pace* Petrarch, those responsible for creating our modern understanding of periodization, suggests that “the ontological categories and systems of classification that accompanied nineteenth-century Europe’s imperial projects and the rise of xenophobic nationalism . . . are so intrinsic to historical practice that they are hard to see. They are not taught; they are absorbed intuitively.”

These essays challenge us to reconsider the categories that we take for granted and are excellent for thinking with. They demonstrate, as Nancy Bradley Warren suggests, the “productive messiness” of playing with boundaries and consciously – always consciously – working within them or against them.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Nancy Bradley Warren, “In Paris of Messiness, or What is Gained by Losing Strong Periodization?,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13:3 (Summer 2013): 138–43.

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