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Periodization and Publication in Premodern French History

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When Carol Harrison and I began editing *French Historical Studies* in 2014 we inherited an article cataloguing system from the days when the journal only appeared in print; likely it had been developed in the 1970s or 1980s, if not earlier. Upon submission, all authors were asked to classify their articles according to topics and times; there was no limit to the amount of either authors could choose. With topical fields such as “social,” “cultural,” “intellectual,” etc., it is unsurprising that most articles fell into multiple categories. It was harder to find a pattern for periodization. The divisions followed traditional, somewhat political lines, with a nod to the general area of “medieval”: medieval, 1500–1774, 1774–1815, 1815–1870, and so forth. Although some submissions clearly fell into one area, especially when classifications covered several centuries, many bridged several groupings. Every year, when preparing the journal’s annual report, we would be reminded of how artificial these topics and times were and vowed to find ones that better represented modern scholarship and gave us more meaningful data. Every year, however, we would become involved in other, more immediate projects for the journal and our own professional activities.

For this reason, when Christine Adams put out the call for papers to this Salon, it seemed like a good opportunity to combine my own professional concerns over periodization in French history with the periodization issues that repeatedly arose when editing *French Historical Studies*. As a fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century specialist, I had always felt a bit like a scholar without a country; as someone whose archival work was on the Franco-imperial borderlands, that sensation was only enhanced. As one of *French Historical Studies*’ editors, I worked with Carol Harrison to expand the journal’s geographic definition of “Frenchness” while adding more material in fields such as social, religious, and gender history which had been less prominent in earlier volumes. Eight years of annual statistics show that we were successful. In the process, however, questions about periodization repeatedly arose and frequently intersected with topical patterns. How might the retention of older periodization and thematic categories affect the ways authors conceptualize their work? And how might they limit the journals to which they can submit manuscripts? What might we do to correct these problems and enhance our dissemination of work with non-traditional periodization or that analyzes chronological eras that can fall between the cracks, as the fifteenth century so often does in French history? To begin the discussion of these questions, and likely others, this contribution focuses more on the publication patterns for articles about late medieval and early modern France, but it offers some tentative suggestions about how editors can proactively influence this field.

I began to answer these questions by requesting data from editors of five major journals—*French History*, the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, and *Speculum*¹—but it quickly became clear that, to gain a useful overview of English-language publishing in late medieval and early modern “French” history, I needed to use online databases.² Although I was well aware of the problems classifying medieval and some early modern materials as “French,” I felt that I had to stick with something close to the modern geographic parameters of France since I was concerned about what current scholarship saw as French history. To keep the search from expanding well beyond the framework of this article and the Salon more generally, I stuck to articles in journals and published in English, between 2012 and 2022, and covering the twelfth through the seventeenth centuries. If the article was in English but published in a journal that was bilingual or was primarily in French, I included it.³

Almost immediately challenges appeared because there is no national or international standard for search engine development. To achieve the widest sampling of materials, I had to use both Historical Abstracts, available through EBSCO, and the International Medieval Bibliography (IMB) because Historical Abstracts only includes materials about subjects post-1400 and the IMB covers through ca. 1600. Not surprisingly there was some overlap, which had to be hand-sorted. In addition, Historical Abstracts uses a broad but unclear definition of history; it also includes some materials covering several centuries after 1400, but it is far from comprehensive. For the IMB, a scholar must specify “history” as part of the search, and it defines its geographical parameters somewhat differently than Historical Abstracts; for example, I found that setting the “area” as “France” left out quite a few materials on the eastern and northeastern borders, but if I made it “France with Switzerland” I gained almost all of the missing articles. I then reviewed the titles, key words, and other classificatory materials to determine if the article was broadly “historical.”

After downloading, sorting, and editing citations from both databases and adding the medieval and early modern articles published by the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, which was, surprisingly, not included in either database, I was left with 1,088 articles from 329 journals. After recovering from my shock at the scope of publishing in premodern French history during the past decade and the sheer number of journals involved, I broke the statistics down into its smaller components. One-third of the articles (362) come from twenty journals, and only eight journals are responsible for publishing approximately one-fifth of the English-language research in French history. In order by the number of articles published covering the years 1100–1700, they are *French History*, *French Historical Studies*, *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, *History of European Ideas*, *Journal of Medieval History*, *Sixteenth*

¹ To these five journals’ statistics, I added those for *French Historical Studies*, to which I still had access as a past editor.

² I would like to thank the following editors for quickly responding to my requests for information and, whenever possible, for their generosity in supplying me with their publication statistics for the last ten years: Joseph Clark, Andrew Daily, Claire Eldridge, Kate Jansen, Bethany Keenan, Karen Nelson, Roxanne Panchasi, Meghan Roberts, Sarah Shurts, Nicholas Terpstra, David Whitford, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. Some even created statistics especially for me, which was extraordinarily collegial!

³ Striking was the emergence of journals publishing in multiple languages, even though most have a “preferred” language. When we began as editors of *French Historical Studies* in 2014, Carol Harrison and I were told that one of the journal’s most unusual but greatest strengths was that it published in both French and English. It is no longer unusual in that way.

Century Journal, *Viator*, and *Speculum*. Of the 221 articles on medieval and early modern French history published by those eight journals, the first two published just over half. Publication in premodern French history is thus both widely dispersed and heavily concentrated.

Given such mixed impressions, these numbers clearly just tell a small, albeit intriguing, part of the story. The rest of this contribution focuses on finding more precise patterns and assessing what these patterns tell us about the challenges of conceptualizing and publishing in late medieval and early modern French history. Beginning with the influential journals for which I have more precise data and moving to the leading international search engines, such as Historical Abstracts and the IMB, the numbers demonstrate decisions made by authors, historian editors, and data entry specialists and suggest the challenges each faces when classifying premodern French history. Not just an academic curiosity, the decisions these numbers reveal affect the dissemination of research, forming the ways fields are shaped and valued.

As I noted near the beginning of this article, before I even had the statistics to support my assessment of their influence, I solicited publication statistics from what turned out to be five of the six main publishers of medieval and early modern French history: *French History*, *French Historical Studies*, *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, and *Speculum*.⁴ Right away difficulties arose when trying to find consistent patterns for periodization and even the statistics themselves: the submission data for *Renaissance Quarterly* was proprietary, and the editors at *Speculum* had only recently begun collecting such publication data. Moreover, the *Journal of the Western Society for French History* had changed its mandate from having a conference-based to an open submission process during the period being analyzed, so its statistics were not comparable to the other journals. That left open for more detailed comparison *French History*, *French Historical Studies*, and the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, all of which generously supplied publication statistics but were unable to provide submissions data that would allow for a more revealing comparison. According to Joseph Clarke, one of the editors of *French History*, their publisher, Oxford University Press, does not regularly provide them with details about submission because of data protection concerns, and the *Sixteenth Century Journal* had recently had enough of that material corrupted by database issues that the numbers they had for submissions would be statistically invalid for this article's purpose. I have some submission numbers for *French Historical Studies*, which I will discuss below, but any conclusions will necessarily be impressionistic.

Each journal had its own, somewhat idiosyncratic, classification scheme, which varied depending on whether the journal was geographically or chronologically focused. For example, among the geographically-defined journals, *French History* divided its submissions into three main areas—medieval, 1500–1815, and late modern—while *French Historical Studies* had more subdivisions: medieval, 1500–1774, 1774–1815, 1815–1870, 1870–1914, 1914–1940, and 1940–present. Editors found some authors classifying their submissions in multiple periods, although, not surprisingly, it happened more in *French Historical Studies*. For the medieval and early modern periods, some articles overlapped, but it appeared that most of the published material was clearly in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries or in the fifteenth century; for *French Historical*

⁴ The sixth journal, *Renaissance Quarterly*, was just in the top thirty of journals publishing premodern French history, so more detailed statistics for this article were not necessary. I thank Nicholas Terpstra for his time and effort answering my questions, however.

Studies forums and special issues played an important role in gaining articles focused on the period before 1700, primarily because forum and special issue editors often wanted to show chronological scope for their theme. Between 2012–22, the number of publications in *French History* covering medieval and 1500–1800 topics ranged between six (2013) and sixteen (2011), but the most common number was between ten and eleven. These numbers only tell a partial story, however. According to Dr. Clarke, their premodern submissions focus primarily on the second half of the sixteenth century and the later eighteenth century with more leaning recently to the eighteenth-century French empire.⁵ That leaves approximately 40-50% of the journal's articles covering pre-1815 history but relatively few covering the period before 1550. The numbers for *French Historical Studies* vary more in part because of the influence of special issues and forums, which can determine the thematic and chronological scope of ca. 40% of the journal's annual publications, and because the journal allows authors to classify their articles in multiple periods. Given those qualifications, approximately 30% of the journal's publications were pre-Revolutionary but, like *French History*, leaned to the eighteenth century. The editors, however, consciously focused on gaining more material from the sixteenth century and earlier and worked with authors to develop research in that era that would appeal to the journal's readership. Particularly successful was the forum in honor of Barbara Diefendorf published in 2017.

Thematic decisions, however, complicate even further the comparatively “simple” chronological statistics. Focusing on the issues that particularly affect scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I would like to highlight two: the definitions of “history” and “French.” Both *French History* and *French Historical Studies* have a specific mandate to publish “historical” work, and I know that, at least for *French Historical Studies*, the editors have discussed whether submissions were sufficiently historical. Similar discussions have occurred about an article being sufficiently French. In the case of *French Historical Studies*, we chose to define “French” broadly and have allowed or solicited work on places that were or at some stage in their past part of a French sphere of influence but they were no longer required to be; that led us to publish material on premodern Indochina, the Caribbean, Alsace, and French-speaking Switzerland. Such considerations are heightened for chronologically-defined journals such as the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. Although its mandate extends to scholarship on any place, 1400–1700, its roots are in European scholarship, and its publications over the past fifteen years reflect those roots, although it has recently broadened its geographic scope and grown more comparative.⁶ The challenge for sorting its statistics for this article is, however, that it is explicitly defined as interdisciplinary. For this reason, although ca. 14% of the articles published by the *Sixteenth Century Journal* since 1998 have been geographically focused on France, it is impossible to tell with the data available which ones are specifically historical, although the history editor, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, has said that they do not have many submissions in French literature.⁷ Even with that qualification, the numbers are somewhat disheartening for specialists in French history. From 1998 to 2004, the *Sixteenth Century Journal* published twenty-nine articles classified as “French” out of 179 research articles, which comes to 16.2% of total publications. From 2006–

⁵ Explanations for *French History*'s publication numbers were communicated in emails dated July 14, 2022.

⁶ Merry Wiesner-Hanks kindly provided me with the publication statistics from 1998–2021. As an example of a broadening geographic focus, see the *Sixteenth Century Journal* 53:4 (2022), which contained articles on early modern China, Mexico, and Japan.

⁷ Email correspondence, July 13, 2022.

15 that percentage goes down dramatically to 9.7%, and from 2016–21, the percentage comes to 10.5%. The latter percentage is somewhat deceptive, however, as during those six years, the journal had two special issues where geographic parameters would be difficult, if not impossible, to define: the 2017 forum on “Teaching and Activism in a Transformed Landscape” and the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, and the 2019 “Taking the Temperature of Early Modern Studies: A Special Fiftieth Anniversary Issue of *The Sixteenth Century Journal*.” The year-by-year breakdown of published French articles for those six years may be more revealing: one out of twenty in 2016, zero out of twenty in 2018, five out of twenty-four in 2020, and three out of twenty-two in 2021. Although far from definitive, these numbers suggest that the journal is receiving fewer materials in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French history, but it is impossible to tell if it is just a question of other journals receiving these manuscripts.

To what extent are these broad impressions corroborated or modified when turning to the larger but less statistically profound pool provided by Historical Abstracts and the IMB? Both of these databases suggest that publishing in premodern French history is still quite active but illustrate the potentially dampening effect categorization can have on dissemination and, by implication, the promotability of scholars working in “unusual” times and fields. For both of these major databases, whose contents bridge the late medieval and early modern periodization of this Salon, it was clear that the idiosyncrasies found in individual journals persisted in these major collections. Despite Historical Abstracts specifically mandating that it does not catalog work covering the period after 1400, it clearly did, but it also had some striking omissions. For example, neither *Speculum* nor the *Journal of Medieval History* were cataloged at all in Historical Abstracts. At all. Authors in the two leading English-language journals on medieval history, and two of the top eight journals in medieval French history, had to rely on the IMB alone among major databases to disseminate their current work. While EBSCO databases, such as Historical Abstracts, are widely available, if expensive, the IMB is much less accessible. For example, I teach at an R1 university and had to rely on temporary permission to access the IMB; our school does not have a subscription, and as medieval studies becomes increasingly niche, I cannot imagine this situation changing.

In addition, when it comes to the search parameters of these large databases, the earlier concerns over what is “French” become even more pointed. This is not the standard problem facing specialists of French history, ca. 1350–1550, of anachronistic modern classifications. It comes down to how cataloguers as well as scholars—and cataloguers for these databases may have no scholarly training—define French. For example, would Caribbean colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth century come up in a search for France or French colonies? Is it a French topic when a scholar analyzes how an ambassador from the kingdom of France reports on the people and places he observed in East Asia? Then there is a problem near and dear to my heart: can you call the Franche-Comté in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries “French” when it was administratively part of the Holy Roman Empire? These issues become particularly complex when the journal is not one where scholars might traditionally look for French materials. For example, *English Historical Review*, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, *Digital Philology*, *Nuncius: Journal of the History of Science*, and *Historical Reflections* had nine or more articles published between 2012 and 2022 in premodern French history although their mandate is not specifically French or ca. 1350–1550 (in fact, many of their articles cover later periods). Some journals might seem even more counter-intuitive, such as the

Acta Periodica Duellatorum, *Archives of Natural History*, and *Early American Studies*. While it is gratifying to see these articles available through either Historical Abstracts or the IMB, I wondered how readily available the articles would be if I had done a less comprehensive search and, therefore, how it might affect the citation indices that modern administrators are so fond of for promotion cases.

When it comes to periodization, the situation is perhaps less fraught but, I would argue, possibly disturbing or even pointless. Both Historical Abstracts and the IMB rely on periodization that the author or a database specialist seems to generate; certainly the chronological descriptors that come up in a search are not those of the journal who provided specialized data for this article. For example, somewhere in the process of database development, the category of “medieval” used in *French Historical Studies* has been transformed into varying numbers: 1000–1500, 1200–1300, etc. IMB clearly sorts articles by century: 14th, 15th, etc. Historical Abstracts uses widely varying dates with no apparent pattern. Some may seem commonsensical for sorting, although they are not necessarily valid historically, such as 1600–1750. Others are extremely precise: 1679–1739, 1368–1415, or 1511–20. In some cases, such dates correspond to a specific event or the life of an individual, but in other cases, the connection is unclear. At times these numbers are so broad as to be absurd, at least for any scholarly purpose, such as one article that ostensibly covers ca 500 BCE to ca 2010. Even seemingly specific ones can be deceptive like the article that runs from 1292 to 2022. As you might imagine, in a collection of over 1,000 articles, there are many similar examples.

Despite these oddities, there are some clear patterns. Old politically inspired periodization is still followed: 1453, 1559, or 1789 appear repeatedly as beginnings or endings of analyses. Many articles, though, work beyond these traditional divisions. The number of articles that covered from sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century until ca. 1830–1850 was striking, as was the number of articles on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century materials that also saw the work as incorporating information and insights relevant to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Chronological divisions tended to be broader in the Historical Abstracts and IMB databases for thematic journals. While sometimes that scope can seem ridiculous, in other cases it points to disciplinary differences in historical periodization, ones that French specialists should consider as they argue for the value of more interdisciplinary approaches. In addition, there are now a number of journals publishing in multiple languages, including English, that are based in non-English-speaking areas. Why should Italian or German journals, for example, follow the chronological categories developed in English-language scholarship, especially when dealing with topics such as the history of science, material culture, and gender or religious history? Moreover, the traditional breaks of French historiography may be irrelevant both to the historical fields in which their journal concentrates and to the contemporary purposes motivating historical studies.

To return explicitly to the topic of this Salon, what are some of the implications of this data for publication and periodization in late medieval and early modern French history? I found it both promising and disturbing. At the most basic level, I was astonished and pleased at the amount of peer-reviewed work in French history, pre-1700, that has been published in the past decade. It was methodologically and geographically diverse and showed incredible creativity as well as expertise in its scholarship. Yet I also grew increasingly concerned about the role of non-

specialists in classifying and disseminating this work. Not only do the academic experts editing journals seem currently to have little direct input on how materials are entered into the databases that are so central for finding publications, but it does not seem that those who do the entering are working from consistent directives. In this situation, for those of us who work in fields and times where we often feel that we fall between the cracks, it can seem a herculean task to get a wider diffusion of our research even when our scholarly communities recognize and respect it.

I find hope, though, in the editors and editorial boards of the key journals publishing in French history with broad chronological mandates. *French History*, *French Historical Studies*, the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, *History of European Ideas*, *Journal of Medieval History*, *Viator*, *Speculum*, *French History and Civilization*, *French Studies*, and the *Catholic Historical Review* all were in the top twenty journals which published in French history. From informal discussions with the editors of about half of those journals, I have learned that periodization divisions are often inherited, as ours were with *French Historical Studies*. With that in mind, it would be worthwhile to consider revising the old periodization schemes; even if editors are uncomfortable with coming up with specific dates, maybe a century-by-century framework like that of the IMB would work. Just some consistency among the specifically French journals could have a wide effect on our field. In addition, the editors could profitably discuss what they are trying to achieve by collecting periodization data: at what stage does it become useful in making editorial decisions? Journal editors also need to speak with their publishers about obtaining full publication data for the journals they are editing and the transmission process of periodization and other data from the pages of Editorial Manager or ScholarOne to major databases such as Historical Abstracts and the IMB. Somewhere dates are being revised, and the implications for the dissemination and impact factors of research go beyond the problems facing specialists in the French fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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