

History 203
Medieval History
Exam Questions

This handout includes a number of possible exam questions for History 203. Of course there is no guarantee that these questions will appear on future exams.

In answering an essay question, you should formulate clearly stated answers for all aspects of the question and support them with specific historical evidence pertaining to your viewpoint. Generally, a simple yes/no answer is not adequate. Historical events are complex and a good answer will show the complexity of the relationships about which the question asks.

As for the evidence, it must be selected so that it applies specifically to the question, providing support for your discussion of the issues. In general, if you provide an "answer" without any evidence, or provide a collection of facts without showing how these details relate to the question, you have provided half an answer. Half an answer--if done well--is worth a "C".

Your evidence must be specific. If you find yourselves using pronouns like "they" or "them", without having particular antecedents to which they refer, you're probably falling into the trap of vagueness. Closely related to this are general statements about groups, classes, or institutions (e.g., merchants, bishops, monks, rulers, nobles, Romans, Irish, the church, the empire, etc.) without mentioning specific instances in which representative members of that group, class, or institution acted as described in your general statement.

These guidelines might help you put together a good essay that is soundly based on historical evidence.

A. FIRST HALF OF COURSE QUESTIONS

1. Patrick Geary described the Germanic world as "perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius." In making this claim, with its emphasis on the importance of Roman culture in actively transforming Germanic political, social, and religious institutions, he implies the derivative nature of the institutions of the Germanic kingdoms.
Discuss the transformation of Western Europe from the Fourth century to the decline of the Merovingians. In your discussion evaluate the comparative importance of Germanic and Roman elements.
2. It has been suggested that the period from Bede of Jarrow to Alcuin of York represents a reversal in the intellectual decline of Western Europe.
Discuss the economic, political, and intellectual factors that contributed to this turnaround and evaluate whether this period was really significant.
3. The fall of Rome is generally considered to represent a pivotal event in European history.
Discuss the major social, political, economic, and cultural changes that came about as a consequence of this event.
4. The Medieval world was built upon elements drawn from Ancient Rome, from the Celtic and Germanic barbarians, and from Christianity. Evaluate the importance of each of these three sources to the development of ideas, society, and politics in early Medieval Europe.
5. The Early Christian church contained both episcopal and monastic elements. Discuss the differing origins of these elements, and their differing contributions to the development of early Medieval Society.
6. One of the games historians play is to identify the origins of the nation-state. Half in jest I have suggested that you could argue that the nation state began between the fifth and seventh centuries. Discuss the evidence for and against this hypothesis, considering circumstances in Visigothic Spain, "Francia", Anglo-Saxon England, and any other part of Europe that seems relevant.
7. The early Middle Ages can be characterized by a decline of the centralized urban institutions of late antiquity and the emergence of a new decentralized society based in the countryside.
Describe this change, considering specific examples of the shift from urban to rural institutions in government, the economy, the church, and society.

8. Some historians have drawn a sharp contrast between Celtic institutions and those of the continent during the early Middle Ages, while others see great similarities. Evaluate the validity of this contrast, discussing similarities and differences between Celtic society and the society of the early medieval Germanic states.
In your discussion consider such elements as the organization and beliefs of the Christian church, the role of the nobility, and the relations between the nobility and the church.
9. During the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries the ideas of classical antiquity were transformed and preserved.
Discuss the major intellectual and institutional factors that contributed to this preservation and transformation, considering how they are reflected in the work of Augustine of Hippo, Martianus Capella, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, and Bede of Jarrow.
10. During the period from the Fifth to the Ninth Centuries various components of the Christian Church interacted and were themselves transformed. Discuss the interactions among the varying elements of the Church in the West (including the Bishops and the various monastic movements) and how these elements of the Church interacted with political authorities.
How did the changing fortunes of these elements reflect broader changes in government and society.
In the light of this diversity within the Church, consider the senses in which it is meaningful to speak of Western Christendom as a single unit and the senses in which such unity is inappropriate.
11. During the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire.
Describe the social and institutional changes that brought about this process, considering the consequences of the activity of such figures as Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Martin of Tours, and Benedict of Nursia.

B. SECOND HALF OF COURSE QUESTIONS

1. Since the writings of Charles Homer Haskins, the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century has remained a standard topic in Medieval history. Discuss the nature of this "renaissance", its causes, and the effect which it had upon Medieval thought. Consider also the influence of this concept upon our historical understanding of the middle ages.
2. Discuss the nature of the Medieval university and the ways in which its structure influenced the reception of Aristotelianism in the Latin West.
3. Aristotle's works arrived in Medieval Europe during the century from 1150 to 1277. Discuss the issues raised by the reception of Aristotle and his influence on Medieval thought.
4. Beginning with Charlemagne, Western Europe witnessed an almost continuous intellectual, political, and economic revival.
Discuss the factors that contributed to the economic growth of Europe from the Eighth to the Thirteenth Centuries and the ways in which these changes contributed to political and cultural growth during that era.
5. Some historians say that the period after Charlemagne saw the end of a unified Medieval society. Yet it has also been argued that this period marked the end of the localism that characterized the early Middle Ages.
Discuss the applicability of these two contrasting interpretations to the period from the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries in the areas of government, economics, and religion. From the examples you present, discuss whether these interpretations are truly incompatible or whether there is a way to reconcile these seemingly opposed views.
6. The Conciliar movement represents a conflict over authority in the Church.
Discuss the origins and nature of this movement and the effects that it had upon concepts of religious and political authority.

7. The twelfth century witnessed the renewal of town life in Western Europe. Discuss the causes of this renewed urbanization and its impact upon Western civilization.
8. The ninth and twelfth centuries were both periods of turning towards antiquity; the Carolingian Renaissance and the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. Compare these two periods, considering the varying paths by which each acquired antique culture, the different elements of antique culture that each turned to, and the varying emphases that they placed upon these elements.
9. Historians disagree as to whether the achievements of Charlemagne and his successors can be evaluated as a success or a failure. Discuss the contributions of the Carolingian era to Europe in the areas of governance/politics and learning.
Evaluate the short-term and long-term influence of the Carolingians in both of these areas.
10. The new Aristotelian philosophy was controversial, particularly as it could be applied to the study of theology. In particular, there was a tension between those who would apply the demonstrative methods of philosophy to the study of astrology, and those who saw these as inappropriate.
Discuss this controversy, paying particular attention to the positions of Grosseteste, Aquinas, Stephen Tempier, and Ockham. In your discussion, consider not only the positions they took but also how their institutional affiliations (religious orders, church offices, etc.) contributed to the development of their points of view.

C. GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. The term Middle Ages was invented during the Renaissance in order to heap opprobrium on what was seen as a sterile age in which government had degenerated into feudal anarchy, religion into superstition, and scholarship into pedantic quibbles of schoolmen over texts that they scarcely understood.
Medievalists tend to dismiss this argument out of hand. Take a fresh look at this argument and consider the extent to which the Middle Ages was an sterile age, merely passing on diluted versions of the heritage of antiquity, and the extent to which it contributed new and vital elements to the European tradition.
2. A noted Medieval historian has written:
Inasmuch as the matter of their thought was transmitted to the men of the Middle Ages, and was not drawn from their own observation and constructive reasoning, the fundamental intellectual endeavor for medieval men was to apprehend and make their own, and re-express
Like all historical generalizations this one has elements of truth and falsity. Discuss the process by which the men of the Middle Ages made their intellectual heritage their own, distinguishing those aspects of Medieval thought for which it is true (or nearly so) from those for which it is invalid.
3. After the Fourth Century, Roman institutions degenerated and new replacements for them were sought.
Discuss the specific religious, political, and economic institutions that provided social stability and cultural continuity in Western Europe from the Fourth to the Twelfth Centuries.
Evaluate the relative significance of these institutions.
4. Discuss the changing institutional structures, methods, and roles of educational institutions in the Latin West from the decline of the Roman Empire to the rise of the Universities.
Do these changes mirror the changes taking place in other areas of society? If so, in what ways and to what extent? On this basis, how much validity would you be willing to give to an assertion that the development of ideas is determined by social and/or economic factors.

5. All aspects of medieval thought were influenced by the ideas of classical antiquity, but the precise nature of this influence changed during the Middle Ages. Discuss the principal paths by which various elements of the thought of classical antiquity passed to the Latin West.
In your discussion compare the significance of these various paths of transmission, paying particular attention to the specific elements of ancient thought were transmitted by each path. In your discussion consider the major individuals and events responsible for the transmission and how the elements selected from ancient thought influenced the development of the culture of the Latin West.
6. According to some historians, the change that marks the beginning of the Middle Ages is the rise of Christianity. Discuss the influences of Christian beliefs and institutions on the Middle Ages.
From your discussion evaluate the extent to which Christianity was the crucial element in the development of Medieval Europe, comparing its influence with that of at least one other possible defining characteristic of the Middle Ages.
7. The term "medieval" has come to have an almost totally negative connotation. The terms "medieval torture" or "medieval conditions" reflect this popular image of the middle ages. Discuss the historical validity of these, and similar, uses, considering specific examples from the medieval period.
8. We often hear people speak of "the Church" in the Middle Ages as if the Church were a single entity. Yet those of us who have studied medieval history know that Christianity was a more complex entity, including monks, bishops and the Pope, the bishop of Rome, all of which changed through time.
Discuss the similarities and differences among these three elements of Medieval Christendom, considering matters of organization, their different functions in religious and lay society, their distinct historical origins, and their changing relations with each other, with temporal rulers and with civil society.
9. The later Middle Ages saw the development of new and more formal structures for business, learning, and the church. It has been suggested that one consequence of this process was restriction on the roles which women had formerly played in these institutions.
Discuss the validity of this thesis, considering the roles of women in the trades, learning and the church before and after 1200.
10. Some historians maintain that Modern Europe was the product of the Middle Ages. Examine the evidence for this claim, considering the extent to which the Middle Ages contributed to the development of political, economic, and social institutions that continued into modern times and the extent to which these institutions differed from modern ones.
In sum, do you consider this claim to be valid? Give specific evidence to support your position.