

## **Sources for Undergraduate Theses in Late Antique and Medieval History, 285-1500**

Oxford is one of the world's leading centres for the study of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with unmatched resources in this field. Whatever you are thinking of doing in this field Oxford has the libraries, the archives, the museums. Graduates come from all over the world to work here on late antique and medieval topics. As an undergraduate if you wish to work in these areas this is the place to do it.

### **PRACTICALITIES**

A good thesis project should start with a body of material, rather than with an issue or question. Issues and questions (not necessarily the ones you expect) will inevitably emerge from a body of material, whereas particularly in the ancient and medieval periods there is no guarantee that an interesting question actually has the material surviving or accessible to answer it. Historians of these periods need to follow their sources, and see where they lead. This is particularly true for an undergraduate thesis that needs to be completed in a relatively short time. Unhappy doctoral students have found themselves struggling with topics where the evidence turns out to be lacking, or liable to take years to assemble. So, start with a body of material.

What you find interesting will obviously determine what sort of source material you choose to work on. What follows is a short guide to a vast subject. It is intended only to provide pointers to the sort of sources likely to make effective theses. The logic behind dealing with this vast period in a single guide is that up to c.1200 this is very much an age without archives. Letters, for example, survive as collected literary texts; documents are most likely to survive in collected copies (cartularies). Almost every text you are likely to want to look at will be available in a published edition. After c.1200 the pattern changes, and in evidential terms there is a case that the early modern world starts in the 13th century. Many of the approaches that work for research on the earlier medieval period do as well for the later medieval period; nonetheless anyone thinking of writing on the 13th-15th centuries should be advised to look at the early modern guides too, particularly for calendars of archival documents and local and national record society publications.

Source material can be divided into two categories:

1. TEXTS
2. MATERIAL / ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Many good theses have combined the two, using the one to shed light on the other.

### **1. TEXTS**

A key problem may be language. If you read Latin, Greek, Arabic, Persian, or a modern language, obviously many further options open up. An advanced knowledge of the relevant language may not be necessary. Many documents, especially financial records, may be written in a very simple style, and there are often summaries to help you. Don't be intimidated.

However, if you don't have any of these languages, remember there is a great deal of material in translation and very good work has been based entirely on these. You are likely to have come across many translated texts that could form the focus for an excellent thesis while doing other papers in this period, but the following list may serve as a reminder of some the major collections of translated texts. (In each case start by going to OLIS and search under Series Title.)

*Loeb Classical Library* – includes facing page translations of over 700 Greek and Latin texts. Many date to Late Antiquity, including works of St. Basil, Eusebius, Julian, Libanios, Nonnos, Procopius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Augustine, Ausonius, Jerome, the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, and Sidonius.

*Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Egypt Exploration Society, Graeco-Roman Memoirs 1- (1898-) – a mass of material from Late Antique Egypt, much of it translated.

See also <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/POxy/frame1.htm>. These texts could be used to explore economic, social, and cultural history. A commentary on a group of texts would make a good thesis.

*The Fathers of the Church* – over 100 volumes of mostly Late Antique date, including letter collections, orations, lives, as well as works of theology. Oxford is a major centre for Late Antique studies, with regular lectures and lively seminar series that would suggest ways of using this material. There is also a *Medieval Continuation* of this series. It is still in its early days, but includes the *Letters* of Peter Damian, a key source for the 11th century.

*Translated Texts for Historians* – 40 + volumes, Late Antique and Early Medieval.

*Manchester Medieval Sources* – translated texts and collections of texts. The latter may be particularly helpful in giving leads to other published sources. For example M. Bailey, *The English Manor, c.1200-c.1500* (2002) is an excellent introduction that shows what can be made of this material, and may give you the confidence to use the untranslated material too. Combining medieval documents, published archaeology, and your own investigations of the modern landscape can produce very interesting results. Some of the volumes are online at <http://www.medievalsources.co.uk/welcome.htm>.

*Crusade Texts in Translation* – a growing series including some comparatively underused texts

*Oxford Medieval Texts* – editions with facing page translations of medieval Latin texts of historical importance.

*Cambridge Medieval Classics* – editions with facing page translations of medieval Latin and Greek literary works.

*Domesday Book* – a research industry in its own right. Available in two major translations and in two searchable electronic versions. *Domesday Explorer* (2000) is the most flexible of these, and allows you to produce maps.

There are various collections of translated Byzantine sources: *Byzantina Australiensia*, *Belfast Texts and Translations*, *Dumbarton Oaks Texts*, *Dumbarton Oaks Saints Lives in Translation*, *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* – some available as electronic

versions: <http://www.doaks.org/> – and some of the volumes of the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*.

Arabic material is more widely dispersed, but the works of Tabari and Ibn Miskawaih are so voluminous as almost to rank as a series in their own right:

*The History of al-Tabarī* Sed. I Abbas, 37 vols. (SUNY, New York, 1985-99)

H.F. Amedroz, D.S. Margoliouth, *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate: original chronicles of the fourth Islamic century* (1920-21)

In addition to these collections there is the **Internet Medieval Sourcebook** – <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>. This is a major resource for those with little or no languages other than English, and has links to look for other translated texts.

Other potentially helpful sites include:

<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/eurodocs/medren.html> – Medieval and Renaissance Europe, Primary Historical Documents.

<http://www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/lk/Link/> – Reading Classical gateway.

<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/sdk13/sdk13home.html> – Simon Keynes' home page, but also a very useful portal to a lot of Anglo-Saxon material.

<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/sdk13/chartwww/NewRegReg.html> – the Anglo-Saxon Charters website.

<http://webpages.ursinus.edu/jlionarons/wulfstan/wulfstan.html>;

<http://www.cif.rochester.edu/~mjbernst/wulfstan/> – Wulfstan's Homilies.

<http://www.doaks.org/Hagio.html> – Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Database.

## 2. MATERIAL / ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The obvious approach here is to take an object, a group of objects, a site, or a group of sites, discuss them and put them in historical context. Regional or local landscapes, churches, mosques, synagogues, castles, bridges, villages, towns, tombs, brasses, coins, seals, textiles, ceramics, art works of all sorts, could all make the focus for excellent theses. Think where you'd like to spend your time – and don't forget the resources of the Ashmolean museum (<http://www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk/>).

Some leads in these areas would include –

N. Pevsner's *Buildings of England* (available in searchable version via OXLIP)

D. J. Cathcart King, *Castellarium Anglicanum*

*Victoria County History* – ongoing major research project. Where a county is covered it can give the basis for a good local / regional study.

*Medieval Archaeology* – the major journal for medieval archaeology in Britain, with a good

index. There are equivalent journals for many other countries, and the Sackler Library's holdings are excellent. Have a look too at <http://odur.let.rug.nl/arge/> – the Archaeological Resource Guide for Europe.

<http://www.cm.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/> and  
<http://www.cm.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/emc> – very useful coin sites

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/index.shtml> – St. Alban's Psalter

[http://www.ne.jp/asahi/luke/ueda\\_sarson/NotitiaPatterns.html](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/luke/ueda_sarson/NotitiaPatterns.html) – Late Roman Shield patterns and the Notitia Dignitatum

<http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/home/index.htm> – Gertrude Bell Project: a major photographic archive of sites in the Near East

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/humanities/cch/PBE/seals/> – Byzantine lead seals. The seals are in Greek but the linguistic challenges are not high. Perhaps you might set about editing some?

Finally don't neglect possibilities of spending the summer working for an archaeological project in the UK or abroad, and developing your thesis from there. If you wish to work abroad, plans usually need to be made early, but see *Archaeology Abroad* at <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/archabroad/>. For Britain contact the county or local archaeology society in the area you are interested in, or look at the Council for British Archaeology's magazine, *Archaeology*. The *Oxford University Archaeology Society* would be well worth joining, and will allow you to make further contacts.