**Introduction:**

**People, Places, and Possessions in Late Medieval England**

**Abstract**

This essay examines the rising interest in materiality and its impact on late medieval scholarship. Presenting an overview of the field, it considers how recent attention to physical spaces and objects has shed new light on the lives and experiences of late medieval men and women, and explores the sources and agendas driving new research. In particular, it evaluates the advantages and challenges of using written evidence to access and investigate material culture. It considers the types of documents informing material approaches, and the questions being asked of them. The analysis also reflects upon the distinct scholarly trajectories of building and landscape studies, and the disjuncture between medieval and early modern scholarship in this area. Providing an introduction to the special issue, it shows how the six contributors collectively address these lacunae to offer holistic readings of the relationships between people, places and possessions in late medieval England.

**Keywords**: Materiality, Late Medieval, England, Possessions, Places, Written Things

In his account of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the chronicler, Thomas Walsingham writes:

‘…The rascals entered the cloister with implements and lifted up the millstones on the outside of the parlour which were on the floor by the parlour entrance, laid there as a memento and memorial of the ancient agreement between the villeins and the monastery in the time of the abbot Richard. Carrying them away, they brought them to the commons. There they smashed them into small pieces, giving a part of them to each man, as the bread that has been blessed is distributed and bestowed upon the Lord’s people in the parochial churches. This was done so that when the people saw those fragments they would recall that they had once prevailed over the monastery in this cause…’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In dislodging the millstones, the rebels sought to redress what they saw as the injustice inflicted upon them by the former abbot, who had confiscated the stones and cemented them into his parlour floor. Once objects of economic importance, the millstones had enabled the tenants to earn a living and maintain their livelihood. Upon being removed and cemented into the floor of the domestic space of the parlour, they became part of the conspicuous consumption of the abbot’s household. Fixed quite literally beneath his feet, the stones provided a highly tangible symbol of the monastery’s power over the tenants and its ability to curtail their access to work and money. By using their tools to forcibly enter the parlour and remove the millstones, the rebels transformed the instruments of their trade into weapons, using them to transgress the boundaries of a ‘private’ space from which they would have ordinarily been excluded. In subsequently breaking the millstones and dividing them in a manner akin to the Eucharist, they marked the objects as symbols of equality and faith, in the process referencing the parish church: a space where everyone was, in theory, equal in the eyes of God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The spatial and material politics of what is now commonly referred to as the ‘millstone Eucharist’ encapsulate the theme of this special issue, which explores the relationship between people, places and their possessions in late medieval England. Collectively, the articles consider how objects acquired meanings when they were exchanged, deposited, used or displayed within particular spaces, and how those objects, in turn, gave meanings to the settings in which they were situated. The contributions focus on the intersections between human and object biographies, to explore how the significance and value of given items was constructed through their ownership and use by specific groups and individuals at a given point in time and space.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The Material Middle Ages**

Material culture, as both the study of objects and buildings and as a methodological approach, has long been a concern for anthropologists and archaeologists, yet only in the past decade have historians explicitly engaged with materiality, and recognised its value for understanding past social relationships. In recent years, medievalists across the humanities and social sciences have embraced the study of material culture, and a now rich array of studies examine how identities and relations between people were formulated and reformulated through architectural spaces, landscapes and objects, both real and imagined.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many focus on specific spaces — parish churches, houses, townscapes — or types of possessions — clothing and dress accessories, household belongings, devotional aids, mortuary objects and manuscripts.[[5]](#footnote-5) While early discussions of both buildings and objects focused overwhelmingly on the precious and spectacular items of the elite, there is now an ever-greater drive to address the materiality of a wider variety of groups and individuals, and to explore how the types of spaces people inhabited and the objects they used intersected with factors such as their social standing, wealth, faith, ethnicity, geography, gender, marital status and point in the life course. To date, studies of medieval material remains have proven particularly profitable for areas such as domesticity, lay religion, gender and social status, with new avenues continuing to open up.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The articles in this special issue encompass a wide range of social groups, objects and contexts. They are, however, unified in three respects: their exploration of materiality through the written record, their focus on post-Black Death England, and their integrated approach to people, the built environment and objects. As the editors of this special issue, we invited our contributors to address these areas, which we see as lacunae in scholarship to date. Dialogues between medievalists and early modernists, and also between those working on buildings, landscapes and objects, remain underdeveloped despite many converging points of interest. While written sources have often been used to study historic objects and the built environment, there has nevertheless been little conscious reflection on the value (and limitations) of accessing material culture through documentary evidence. As medievalists continue to utilise the archival record for the study of materiality, this special issue considers the types of documents informing these new approaches, and also establishes the questions we can ask of written sources when they describe objects and spaces.

**Writing Things**

The contributors to this special issue include historians, art historians, archaeologists and a historical geographer, yet they are unified in their use of the archival record as the initial focus for their investigations of material culture. The centrality of written evidence to the articles in this special issue thus defines it as a body of scholarship which is primarily historical in its evidence-base, despite the authors’ differing methodological perspectives and their sensitivity to the ways in which textual and non-textual sources might intersect.

The wide range of documents underpinning the articles — escheators’ records; probate and household inventories; relic-lists; deposition evidence from instance litigation in an ecclesiastical court; and disputes at the King’s Bench and Star Chamber — attest to the rich and varied perspectives written evidence can offer on the relationships between buildings, landscapes and things. The line between document and object, of course, is not always clear-cut. Julian Luxford, whose article in this issue focuses on relic-lists, has shown elsewhere that such records could function as conduits for divine power in their own right, with contemporaries attributing to them some of the efficacy that relics themselves were believed to hold.[[7]](#footnote-7) The contributors to this special issue, however, do not focus on archival records as objects, but rather on buildings and objects as mediated through the written word. The exploration of objects and buildings through documentary sources is by no means a new endeavour, yet the variety of sources and questions posed in this special issue show that those working on medieval materiality are continuing to offer fresh perspectives on what might be considered more ‘traditional’ archival sources and are also bringing hitherto unexploited or overlooked records to the fore.

Examples of the more ‘traditional’ sources explored in this special issue include the relic-lists considered by Luxford and household inventories discussed by Rachel Delman. Relic-lists have often informed studies of pilgrimage and the supernatural, yet in his article Luxford asks how we can use three shrine keepers’ inventories pertaining to the Shrine of Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey to address the contents and day-to-day care and curation of a nationally significant relic collection by the monastic community. In her analysis of the materiality of Alice Chaucer’s residence at Ewelme in Oxfordshire, Delman uses the household inventory — a source familiar to architectural historians concerned with the layout and contents of lost and increasingly also standing buildings — to consider the late medieval great household as a site of female authority.In addressing the everyday conservation of sacred space through relic-lists and gendered displays of power through household inventories, Luxford and Delman demonstrate how new questions can invite us to re-evaluate sources which usually form the basis of different research agendas.

The contributors to this special issue also consider how hitherto underutilised sources might shed new light on existing debates. Court records, in particular, have recently proved a rich repository for the study of social relationships as produced and reproduced through material culture and the built environment.[[8]](#footnote-8) Jeremy Goldberg shows the merits of ecclesiastical court records for exploring the rhythms and routines of mercantile and artisanal households. Gabriel Byng and Briony McDonagh, meanwhile, draw on the disputes at the King’s Bench and Star Chamber; Byng to illuminate the affective relationships of parishioners to their pews and McDonagh to investigate landscapes of protest. In their co-authored article, Chris Briggs, Alice Forward, Ben Jervis and Matthew Tompkins showcase the richness of escheators’ accounts — records made by the royal officials responsible for confiscating the belongings and chattels of felons, fugitives and outlaws on behalf of the Crown — for exploring the distinctive materiality of peasant domesticity. This body of source material has, until now, been overlooked in favour of probate inventories, which is surprising given that the latter are relatively few in number before 1530.

How knowable are written things? A defining contribution of this special issue is its engagement with this very question. In their co-authored introduction to *Everyday Objects*, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson show that the very centrality of objects to everyday life means that they ironically may remain hidden to us, as they were not always consciously considered by the people who used and wrote about them.[[9]](#footnote-9) On the surface, the study of extinct objects also appears to pose a problem for a material culture analysis, which prioritises the physical qualities of a particular object, otherwise referred to as its ‘thingness’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Weight, shape, material, texture, scent, blemishes and embellishments all inform our understanding of an object’s purpose, use and significance. The things discussed in this special issue, however, have been consciously recorded, be that as the result of a legal process, the maintenance of an elite household, or through the cataloguing of sacred objects. Equally, their physical properties often form a vital component of such documents, albeit mediated through the clerical eyes of those recording them.

The recording of absent or damaged items is also revealing of the value contemporaries placed on certain objects. Several items described in one of the relic-lists analysed and transcribed by Luxford are said to have been lost or stolen, and a locket of thorns is recorded as having lost its gold case. The scribe’s remembrance and recording of these missing objects is indicative of their importance to the relic collection as a whole, and also to the memory of the monastic community. Their inclusion also reminds us that the materiality of objects was not fixed or static; rather, appearance, form and function could change through their use and movement from person to person and place to place, with their brokenness or incompleteness becoming part of their biography.

Just as absent objects might sometimes be recorded, so present objects might also be excluded from the written record. Both Goldberg and Briggs, Jervis, Forward and Tompkins point to the invisibility of certain things or groups of things within their records, although this is not surprising given that both the probate inventories discussed by Goldberg and the escheators’ records considered by Briggs and his collaborators were made as part of a legal process which placed considerable weight on the economic worth of things, as opposed to their emotional, affective or spiritual value. Byng also highlights the rarity of surviving pew lists before the fifteenth century, attributing this to the idiosyncratic process of medieval pew installation up until this point. The same can be said of space. In contrast to the inventories of the aristocratic and bourgeois elite considered by Delman and Goldberg, space was rarely an organising principle for the escheator and the authors of probate inventories, a peculiarity which Briggs, Jervis, Forward and Tompkins attribute to the smaller size of peasant households and fewer possessions found in them. McDonagh also notes that property became an increasingly spatialized concept towards the end of the middle ages and into the early modern period, as seen in the changing language and content of the Star Chamber records. Silences do not mean that the objects and buildings were not there, they simply mean that scribes compiling records often had different agendas and value systems from the historian, a divide we are continuing to bridge, navigate and explore.

**Possessions**

This special issue casts light on the relationship between people and the material world through a focus on objects as possessions, namely as they were owned or controlled by specific groups and individuals at particular points in time and space. The types of objects or things people might claim ownership over, and their reasons for doing so, include a broad range of possibilities and were also historically specific. The medieval concept of a ‘thyng’, as Kellie Robertson shows, had a wider semantic range than it does today, encompassing both the human and the non-human, the inanimate and inanimate.[[11]](#footnote-11) Robertson’s observations draw upon the work of the historian and philosopher of science, Bruno Latour, who famously argued that the lines between cultural and natural, human and thing, and subject and object were considered far more porous in pre-modernity than in modern Western thought.[[12]](#footnote-12) The objectification of the human body through relics is a case in point.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Westminster relic-lists analysed by Luxford, for example, include St Ethelbert’s head ‘full of Braines & vncorrupted’, along with ‘crustas’ from the head of St. Christopher, a beard-hair belonging to St. Peter and a head-hair from the Virgin Mary. McDonagh also shows that late medieval concepts of chattel were wide-ranging, and included ‘livestock, agricultural implements and tools, hedges and fences, as well as furniture, clothing, cash and even leasehold property’. Scholars have also recently recognised the medieval treatment of ecological entities, from animal bodies (both dead and alive) to food and plant matter, as material culture.[[14]](#footnote-14) As possessions and cultural constructs, they could express and constitute an individual’s status or belonging to a specific social group in a manner akin to inanimate objects and artefacts, as McDonagh and Briggs and his collaborators both show. The variety of possessions considered in this special issue: tapestries, household goods, relics, church pews, utensils, stones, water and livestock, capture the medieval understanding of ‘object’ as an elastic and wide-reaching category.

Individuals possessed a range of items, yet their privileging of certain objects can tell us much about their place in the world and their experiences of it. Briggs and his collaborators argue that eco-materiality, including crops and livestock was as — if not more — important to peasant materialities than artefacts such as tools and pottery vessels. For Goldberg’s artisans and merchants, however, the reverse was true. Objects might also be gendered through their association and use. McDonagh observes that women more commonly removed from stones from ploughed fields than men and that they also were more likely to use them as weapons than their male counterparts, who characteristically wielded swords, bows and firearms.

The variety of objects considered in this special issue — from the precious and the sacred to the mundane and the everyday — is also a testament to the broadening agendas of historians interested in material approaches. While consumption and patron-client relationships have long been topics of enquiry, historians are increasingly interested in the wider significance of objects beyond their aesthetic value and economic worth. The affective relationships between people and things has been a popular subject in discussions of lay spirituality and the history of emotions in particular, and numerous studies now explore how a variety of different objects functioned as material mnemonics of both earthly and spiritual relationships.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, it is striking that none of the articles in this special issue take the production of objects or the economic value of elite material culture as their principal focus, but instead examine how a wide variety of items were experienced within a lived nexus of spaces and places beyond their initial creation.

Following the work of Latour and Alfred Gell among others, recent studies have also debated the potential for ecological and material things to exert agency, or rather ‘do’ things, in medieval, early modern and contemporary cultures.[[16]](#footnote-16) Of the contributions to the special issue, Byng’s article on disputes over parish church seating is the most radical in its approach to object agency, considering ‘spatially, socially and ideologically disruptive *things*, and how these things outstripped the function they were made for (i.e. to act as seats) and shaped the ideas and emotions of the people who used them’. Byng argues that the power of these things lay not just in their materiality, but also in the problematic, ontological and affective relationships that people had with the material world. Of enclosure protest, McDonagh argues that commoners counted on the agency of a highly mobile form of chattel — livestock — to assert their rights, exploiting the free will and disorderliness of these animals, and relying on them to transgress boundaries and disrupt geographies to their advantage.

Others have found the concept of material agency useful for thinking about medieval attitudes towards the inanimate. Those working on spirituality and the occult in particular have explored how the miraculous qualities attributed to items such as relics and amulets are revealing of medieval *mentalities* and belief systems.[[17]](#footnote-17) Relics especially have been regarded a discrete category of object on account of their supernatural qualities and their capacity, as Alexandra Walsham puts it, ‘to operate as a locus and conduit of power’.[[18]](#footnote-18) The sanctity of relics, as Luxford shows, was constituted through divine association, either in the form of a saint’s body part or item that had been in contact with it, and also through the precious metals and stones used to encase and adorn it.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Historians interested in religious experience have also argued for the historical specificity of visuality as a cultural construct, highlighting how the affective spirituality of the later middle ages privileged emotive and sensorily rich viewing practices, particularly among female devotees.[[20]](#footnote-20) Closely linked to this is the relatively recent surge of interest in materiality and embodiment, with Sarah McNamer and others showing how the medieval concept of ‘beholding’ an object or image encompassed a ‘sense of possession’, and a physicality beyond mere visual engagement.[[21]](#footnote-21) Others have shown how dress, gesture and the material world together constituted a physical performance through which faith, social standing and gender were articulated.[[22]](#footnote-22) Delman in particular contributes to this aspect of scholarship, positing the tapestry of St. Anne in Alice’s Chaucer’s household chapel at Ewelme as a visual stimulus for the devotional life of the duchess. She argues that the images of Anne provided an embodied and emotive journey of the saint’s pious example as wife, mother and educator, which Alice could draw upon during pertinent moment in her own life course. Likewise, Byng presents the church pew as an embodied site, where parishioners might sit, kneel and gossip with friends and associates. Such approaches importantly draw together different types of objects — clothing, furniture and furnishings — and consider how they functioned holistically, rather than as separate categories.

**Places**

In this special issue, place is defined as a location or site which is made through human action and intervention.[[23]](#footnote-23) While we can learn much from items displayed in museum cases and catalogued from archaeological sites, recent scholarship has emphasised that the purposes and meanings of objects can only be fully understood through the recreation — in so far as is possible — of the settings in which they were used and experienced.[[24]](#footnote-24) For medieval studies, scholarship on civic culture, lay religion and domesticity has led the way in illustrating the value of an integrated approach to materiality and rituals.[[25]](#footnote-25) Technological advancements, including three-dimensional recording tools and Geographic Information Systems (GIS), new archaeological discoveries and collaborative projects are also paving the way for more integrated and dynamic approaches to medieval materiality.[[26]](#footnote-26) Growing interest in the multi-sensory experiences of daily life in medieval England is encouraging more holistic readings of objects and places beyond movement and vision, to incorporate sound, smell, touch and taste.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is also becoming increasingly apparent that while specific rooms and buildings may have been designed with specific purposes in mind, the lived experience of space was in reality far more fluid and changeable than surviving ground plans or household inventories might indicate.[[28]](#footnote-28) Yet, as Kate Giles and others highlight, there is still much work to be done, with the separate intellectual trajectories of object, building and landscape studies continuing to impact upon current approaches.[[29]](#footnote-29) Accordingly, the contributors to this special issue have been encouraged to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between people, objects and the built environment, so as to create a vibrant and dynamic picture of people and their possessions within lived spaces. By variously focusing on the daily routines of the household, the ceremonies surrounding childbirth, the day-to-day curation of a relic collection, and disputes in the church and fields, the authors collectively examine life in medieval England as it was lived and experienced through the material environment of the home, sacred spaces and the landscape.

*The Home*

The design and use of domestic space has long been of interest to scholars seeking to explore displays of wealth and status, and, more recently, expressions of gender and domestic piety through the built environment.[[30]](#footnote-30) Of the six articles in this special issue, three concentrate on domestic space; Delman considers the aristocratic residence, Goldberg examines mercantile and artisanal households, and Briggs and his collaborators concentrate on the peasant home. The appearance of these articles side-by-side in this special issue provides a rare point of comparison between the domesticity of these three groups, which until now have been the subject of distinct historiographical narratives determined by social status.

At the highest social level, the study of castles and great residences has in the past few decades moved away from solely military interpretations, to consider how such buildings and their hinterlands projected messages of lordly authority and signalled messages of belonging and exclusion through the physical ordering of space.[[31]](#footnote-31) The late medieval expansion of royal and aristocratic houses and the shift in emphasis from the great hall to the lord’s personal chambers or apartments is now widely recognised as a marker of a shift in mentality among the elite, whereby the lord’s power and wealth was increasingly expressed through seclusion and separation. This was most obviously signalled through the increasing spatial complexity of the great residence, whereby the single solar or chamber above the great hall and parlour developed into a series of interconnected rooms for the lord’s personal use.[[32]](#footnote-32) More recently, medievalists have explored how messages of power and authority were displayed through the rhythms and routines of the great household, considering how rituals such as hunting, feasting, collective reading and worship gave meaning to the settings in which they occurred.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Castles and aristocratic residences have also provided a *locale* for investigating gendered practices and uses of space.[[34]](#footnote-34) The subject has generated recent interest among academics and heritage professionals seeking to recover women’s stories and tell gendered narratives at historic sites and properties.[[35]](#footnote-35) Despite this, however, there remains a strong tendency in published scholarship to interpret royal and noble women’s associations with the domestic as a sign of their passivity, and to also treat objects and architecture as separate categories.[[36]](#footnote-36) Delman responds to these lacunae by considering the materiality of the late medieval great residence from the perspective of the female gaze. She argues that the occurrence of the birth and baptism of Alice Chaucer’s grandchild at Ewelme Manor House in 1466 provided a gendered viewing context for the iconography displayed, with the mutually constitutive relationship between iconography, space and ritual authorising the duchess’s authority as household and family matriarch.

Beneath the level of the aristocracy, merchants and other members of the bourgeois elite likewise began to enjoy more spatially complex homes towards the end of the middle ages, which has also commonly been interpreted as a sign of their increased wealth and purchasing power after the Black Death.[[37]](#footnote-37) Indeed, the ‘middling sorts’ have attracted much interest in the past two decades, with scholars now eager to understand them as a distinctive group in their own right, rather than as an adjunct to their aristocratic superiors.[[38]](#footnote-38) The work of Jeremy Goldberg, Maryanne Kowaleski, Felicity Riddy, Sarah Rees Jones and Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson among others has shown how the unique value systems of the bourgeois elite and other urban dwellers were reflected in the distinctive material culture of their households, a point that is developed further by Goldberg in his contribution to this special issue.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In contrast to castles and aristocratic residences, scholarship on the bourgeois household has been particularly successful in adopting a holistic approach to gender and domestic materiality, and several studies now consider how women’s roles as wives, daughters, servants and apprentices were shaped and formulated through the spaces and objects of the bourgeois household as both a living and working space.[[40]](#footnote-40) In his contribution, Jeremy Goldberg builds on his earlier work to argue that the materiality of the bourgeois home expressed the identities of both the master *and* mistress of household in equal measure. While mercantile and artisanal houses were ultimately sites of patriarchal authority, Goldberg argues that the day-to-day running of the household and its reputation nevertheless rested on a successful partnership between husband and wife. Goldberg’s exploration of the ‘distinctive duality’ of the pre-modern bourgeois household as both home and business also informs his gendered reading of domesticity. The workshop, both literally and metaphorically, gave a window onto the wider world, thus attesting to the fluidity which existed between indoor and outdoor space, and providing a further challenge to the categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ which long plagued discussions of the gender and the domestic.

Our understanding of peasant domesticity has also greatly advanced in recent years. The once widely held view that peasant houses were primitive or ‘crude huts’ has been reappraised, with historians and archaeologists providing ever more nuanced approaches to the peasant home and its functions.[[41]](#footnote-41) Interdisciplinary research projects such as ‘The South Oxfordshire’ project, headed by Stephen Mileson and Stuart Brookes at the University of Oxford, and the ‘Living Standards and Material Culture in English Rural Households, 1300-1600’ project, led by Chris Briggs at the University of Cambridge and Ben Jervis at Cardiff University, and represented in this special issue, have played an important role in this reassessment, offering a multi-disciplinary analysis and circumventing the silences of written evidence.[[42]](#footnote-42) In deploying a wide range of research techniques and expertise, both projects have contributed to a fuller understanding of the materiality of peasant life and the multi-sensory experiences of daily life in rural homes and landscapes. In this special issue, Briggs, Jervis, Forward and Tompkins show that the rural peasantry had a sophisticated and distinctive material culture, which defined and shaped their identities as individuals and as a social group.

*Sacred Space*

Two of the articles in this special issue, those by Gabriel Byng and Julian Luxford, explore sacred spaces in the form of the parish church and a major Benedictine abbey. The architectural design of churches and cathedrals — their cross-shaped layout, east-facing focus and towers reaching heavenwards — marked such spaces out as buildings of worship. Yet, as Laura Varnam argues, ‘sacred space cannot be sustained by architecture alone; it requires performance in order to be actualised within the material frame’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Indeed, Luxford considers how the monastic community’s daily curation of the relic collection at Westminster Abbey helped define its status as a holy space. Byng, meanwhile, explores how parishioners showcased their social standing within the community through the occupation of pews which were ‘ranked’ according to their proximity to the altar, thus highlighting sacred space as a social as well as ecclesiastical concern, and attesting to the ways in which sacred spaces and objects functioned as an organising principle of social relations.

Byng’s analysis of disputes over parish church seating ties into a larger body of scholarship which explores how faith and social relations were shaped and constituted through the physical fabric of the parish church.[[44]](#footnote-44) Several scholars have investigated visuality and viewing practices within the late medieval church, to consider how the experiences of late medieval parishioners were determined by their location within the building.[[45]](#footnote-45) As with the home, gender has also assumed an important place in discussions of the materiality of parish piety.[[46]](#footnote-46) Katherine French and Nicola Lowe, for example, have explored how female agency was expressed through devotional bequests of textiles and women’s buying and selling of seats, showing how domestic objects were used to conflate the so-called ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces of church and home.[[47]](#footnote-47) Once inside the church, objects from the home acquired a sacred character, while also continuing to reference their secular place of origin.[[48]](#footnote-48) Building on these observations, Byng argues that the ‘material correlation between home, church and furnishings’ forged a ‘distinctive and deliberate creation of links between possessions, expressing new or enduring economic capabilities, social distinctions and cultural reach’.

In his discussion of the relics of St. Edward the Confessor’s shrine at Westminster Abbey, Luxford shows how sacred spaces were not only thought suitable for housing relics but were also made holy through their presence. Supernatural objects might also retain their powers across time and space, and even had the transformative potential to place secular spaces under divine protection.[[49]](#footnote-49) Luxford cites the example of the Virgin’s girdle, which was kept encased in the shrine of Edward the Confessor and carried to expectant mothers during labour. This was not only seen to retain its powers across time and space, but also placed the expectant mother and the birth- chamber under the Virgin’s protection. Delman suggests that images or the physical presence of ‘demi-ceints’ or girdles in Elizabeth de la Pole’s chamber at Ewelme Manor House in 1466 were similarly intended to act as talismans. Movable objects of various kinds were thus created and sustained porous boundaries between church and home, so as to shape the daily lives of late medieval men and women in a myriad of ways.

*Landscape*

Over the past few decades, landscape archaeologists, historians and geographers have increasingly explored how the ordering of historic landscapes can be used to inform discussions of social status, power, memory, religion and gender.[[50]](#footnote-50) The value of outdoor space for understanding social relationships is summed up by Stephen Mileson, who argues that ‘Landscape History offers one of the most promising approaches to past inhabitants’ perceptions, embodied…in the intimate daily experience of a particular physical environment’.[[51]](#footnote-51) The most dominant theme in studies of outdoor space to date has been a focus on royal and lordly landscapes. Scholars have explored how the creation of deer parks, gardens, orchards and other settings of recreation and leisure signalled the lord’s wealth and status by demarcating the great residence within the wider landscape and by providing stages on which the rituals of elite life could be played out.[[52]](#footnote-52) The physical and visual relationships between manor house, church and settlement have also assumed an important place in these discussions, and the commonality of these features to lordly topographies is seen to mark the lord’s aristocratic status through reference to their spiritual, social and economic privileges.[[53]](#footnote-53) More recently, scholars have begun to consider gendered experiences of the landscape.[[54]](#footnote-54) There has also been a drive to consider how non-elite groups experienced and utilised outdoor space for their own ends and purposes, as explored by Briony McDonagh in her contribution.[[55]](#footnote-55) While the creation of lordly landscapes and the transgression of their boundaries (through instances such as park break) has been explored from an elite perspective, McDonagh explores the other side of the coin, to consider the impact of the reorganisation of the landscape had on the everyday lives of non-elites within the community. McDonagh does not present this as a straightforward binary, however, arguing that while hedges and other agricultural barriers might mean one thing to the landowner and another to the commoner, these meanings were not fixed, and could also shift with time and seasonal change.

As Chris Briggs and his collaborators and Jeremy Goldberg show, outdoor space meant different things to the rural peasantry and urban dwellers, such as artisans and middling elites. In contrast to the considerable emphasis laid on ‘outside’ items in the escheators’ records studied by Briggs, Jervis, Forward and Tompkins, Goldberg finds that references to gardens and other outside spaces are rarely mentioned in the probate inventories for the artisans and merchants of York, thus signalling the distinct occupations of the two groups and highlighting the differing ways in which they perceived the relationship between indoor and outdoor space. The discussions of outdoor space in this special issue thus attest to the rich potential of landscape approaches for exploring a wide variety of aspects of daily life in medieval England and also point to the need for future studies to discuss indoor and outdoor spaces as an integrated whole.

**Late Medieval England**

The articles in the special issue are unified in their geographical and chronological focus. All consider post-Black Death England, and many of the contributors extend the boundary of the middle ages beyond 1500. Often seen as a time of religious, political, economic and cultural upheaval, the period following the Black Death offers rich potential for the study of material culture and its meanings. As we have already seen, those interested in consumption have explored the growing complexity of the household and its goods across the social scale at this time. Despite this, periodisation has often acted as a barrier to studies of late medieval materiality, particularly for an English context, where studies usually fall either side of the late medieval/early modern divide.[[56]](#footnote-56) The categories of ‘medieval’ and ‘early modern’ thus continue to impact upon the ways in which material culture scholarship is conceived of and written, despite the fact that historical periodisation often makes little sense for spatial or object histories, as highlighted by McDonagh in her contribution.

The contributors to this special issue collectively embrace the rich potential of the period 1300 to 1600 for exploring elements of change and continuity through space and material culture. As indicated above, McDonagh, Briggs and Byng highlight and take advantage of the growing number of records from the fifteenth century onwards, and they are also sensitive to how alterations in the style and content of these documents is revealing of the shifting concerns and priorities of those who wrote and commissioned them.

Elements of continuity surface in the articles on sacred space by Luxford and Byng. Luxford convincingly argues that a collection of relic lists from a major shrine such as Westminster would not have been ignored for so long had they been made in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, when religion was considered more materialistic. Byng also highlights that pewing practices and concern over one’s place in the church continued well beyond the fifteenth century. In privileging the Reformation as an agent of change, religious historians have often overlooked the fact that the reality was far more nuanced, with change and continuity often existing side-by-side.

The ways in which individuals and groups engaged with objects and spaces could also be historically informed. McDonagh reminds us that the practice of enclosure had medieval roots, despite often being considered a post-medieval phenomenon. Her article demonstrates the value of a long view of enclosure protest for understanding changes and continuities in the physical arrangement of the landscape, as well as the perceptions and motivations informing those decisions. Delman equally examines aristocratic women’s roles as preservers of familial memory. Locating her study of Alice Chaucer within a wider scholarship on women’s roles as stakeholders of courtly rituals, she argues that the duchess, like many of her aristocratic female contemporaries, was responsible for curating, preserving and maintaining the materiality and rituals central to aristocratic life for future generations.

In placing the sacred and the secular, the elite and the non-elite, and the indoor and the outdoor side-by-side, this special issue brings together hitherto divergent strands of medieval materiality studies so as to highlight the meanings of material culture for a wide range of groups and individuals across late medieval England. Whereas studies to date have prioritised a single social group, region, object or building type, the broad reach of this special issue provides a holistic reading of the materiality of later medieval England, whilst also highlighting the richness of textual approaches for current and future research in the field.

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