

living

# MEDIEVAL

EDITION 4

HISTORY, BY THOSE WHO LIVE IT.

*DEC '23 Winter Special*

## UNDER COVER OF A SNOW STORM

With historian Sharon Bennett  
Connolly

## RE-CREATING A MEDIEVAL DRESS

With historical seamstress  
Katarzyna Karcz-Płocharska

INCLUDING: JUST FOR FUN... A CHRISTMAS HISTORY CROSSWORD!



# WELCOME

# living MEDIEVAL

HISTORY, BY THOSE WHO LIVE IT.

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS



### WELCOME TO OUR DECEMBER ISSUE!

The festive season is in full flow and the living history scene has quietened down for a time. We have spent our days and nights, relaxing, wrapping gifts and prepping for the next season of reenactment.

As we look back on the past 12 months, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated contributors and avid readers. Curating a magazine dedicated predominantly to Living History and reenactment comes with many unique challenges and without you all, there simply wouldn't be a magazine!

Our December issue marks a more relaxed, scaled back edition, with festive themed contributions and a fun crossword for good measure; something to enjoy over a mulled wine or two.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Your passion for history fuels the pages of Living Medieval, and together, we have enjoyed a year of exploration, learning, and a shared commitment to keeping history alive.

*The Editors*



# WHAT'S INSIDE?

## CONTRIBUTORS

Will Davis-Coleman, Andrew Hall, Sharon Bennett Connolly, Katya Zielonko, Katarzyna Karcz-Płocharska, Elena Sterling, Adrian Bennett, Max Sommer, Eva-Maria Mair, Jenn Robinson, Alan Hinton



## LIVING HISTORY

- † Twelfth Night 03
- † Recreating a medieval dress 04
- † Professional embroiderers in late-medieval Europe 06
- † Medieval Board Games 07

## MEDIEVAL WORLD

- † Tracing the Roots of the Glastonbury Thorn 09
- † Medieval Wassail 10
- † Under Cover of a Snowstorm 11
- † The Medieval Green Knight and the Spirit of Christmas 12

## MANUSCRIPTS & MEDIA

- † Re-imagining - a readers dilemma explored 14
- † 'The Year 1000 – The Netherlands in the Middle of the Middle Ages' 15
- † Living Medieval's Christmas Crossword 08

### THE SMALL PRINT

Copyright Living Medieval©, All rights reserved. Nothing produced in this publication may be reproduced without prior written consent of the publishers; appropriate action will be taken against those infringing upon these rights. Contributors providing material for publication must ensure correct permissions have been obtained before submission. Articles and the opinions expressed in this magazine do not necessarily represent the views of the editors. Advertising in Living Medieval does not necessarily imply endorsement by the editors. All images are either: available in the public domain; have been granted permission for use by the supplier, or have been obtained through the appropriate channels; credits provided.

# TWELFTH NIGHT

BY KATYA ZIELONKO

The winter months in England are dark, cold, and gloomy, leading to more time spent inside limiting how people venture outside. This is not unlike the winters for Anglo-Saxons, the cold and dreary weather forcing people to stay inside for long periods of time and vastly reducing the amount of time people could work outside. The shorter days limited what could be grown and harvested, leading to a time of possible fasting. Due to this enforced lack of activity, it is no surprise that festivals evolved to fill the time. These festivals provided the people of something to look forward to and for people to share warmth and shelter with one another.

Twelfth Night, also known as Epiphany Eve, is a festival celebrated on the last night of the Twelve Days of Christmas. This holiday is practiced by Christians with a variety of traditions, many having food and drink as the centre of the celebration. One such tradition is the Twelfth Night cake, where a dried bean and pea are baked into a cake and those that found the bean or pea became the king and queen for the evening's entertainment. This tradition was popular around 1700 but has nearly gone extinct now.

The word Christmas is an Anglo-Saxon word – Cristesmaesse – first recorded in 1038. But celebrations around 25th December were not only for Christians. Pagan Angles, Saxons and Jutes instead celebrated Yule, a period of time during the dark winter months that contained periods of feasting and celebration around the winter solstice and new year. Bede (725 CE) wrote “December ‘Giuli’ the same name by which January is called. They began the year on the 8th kalends of January [25 December], when we celebrate the birth of the Lord.” It is believed that the Anglo-Saxons celebrated Yule over two months, with multiple feasts occurring throughout, and the focus of the feast being the night of the solstice. The subsequent conversion to Christianity led to some Yule traditions being shared by Christians and Christmas, such as

the Yule tree becoming the Christmas tree.

Regia Anglorum, a Viking and Anglo-Saxon reenactment group has followed some Anglo-Saxon traditions of holding feasts during the period the dark months of winter. In January members attend the Twelfth Night feast, hosted at the Anglo-Saxon longhall site, Wychurst. This hall provides the optimal location for hosting such a feast, to celebrate all that the society and its members has accomplished the past year, and to provide something for members to look forward to in the slower months of the reenactment season.

We adopt traditions from both Twelfth Night and Yule, decorating the hall with holy and other evergreen plants. The hall, lit by candles and the fire in the hearth

provides a warm environment for people to share a meal and drink with. The meal itself is cooked over the fire throughout the day, a feast of many courses of foods that would have been available at the time. Richer cuts of meat and sweet courses with ingredients that would have been expensive at the time. And some years we have even crowned a king and queen, their bread containing a dried pea and bean.



Photos taken by Jenn Robinson

A Twelfth Night/Yule feast would not be complete without forms of entertainment. Between courses members recite poems and tell epic stories of mythology by candlelight, from serious retellings of Beowulf to silly recreations of Norse sagas, the attendees are not left bored. The joy and merriment can be felt when standing outside the hall, seeing the soft glow of fire and candlelight and hearing the conversation and laughter coming from the hall always fills our hearts with love and appreciation for the friends we have made.



# RECREATING A MEDIEVAL DRESS

with medieval seamstress  
KATARZYNA  
KARCZ-PŁOCHARSKA  
@KATESUBROSA

In this article we will sew together a medieval dress. At first I wanted to recreate Herjolfsnes no. 38, also known as Norlund no. D10580, found in Greenland and dating to the late 14th century. However, I decided that our dress will be based on no.42 for a simpler model that can be done by anyone. Also some of the men's tunics are done in a similar way, so the article is useful not only for woman.

The original is brown. It has pockets and the down part is partly tablet woven. The neckline is decorated with a cord sewn on the edge. We will not make 1:1 exact copy, because the proces would be way more complicated and harder to describe in one article.

Dress that I made has no pockets, is not tablet woven on the down part and the neckline don't have a cord sewn in.



LET'S GET TO WORK

What we need?

Needles, timble, long linear scissors, measuring tape, threads, woolen textile and a piece of charcoal.

How to take measurements? We need chest, waist, wrist, biceps circumference and the length from upper shoulder to the ground and a full length of an arm.

Making a pattern.

We need to make a pattern with seam allowance. On the bodice we have 6 pairs of seams that gives additional 12 cm to our circumferences. To make a dress more loose we will add additional 2cm. That makes our chest circumference plus 14 cm due to seam allowance.

To make it as simple as possible I will use an example. If our chest circumference is 86 cm we add 14 and we have 100 cm. It will be 40 cm on the front part, 40 cm on the back part, and we are left with 20cm which gave us 5 cm on every side gore. And this is our ready pattern with already added seam allowance.



BRINGING MEDIEVAL PRINTING INTO LIVING HISTORY

We can also use other method if its simpler for us.

Pattern is well shown in Medieval Garments Reconstructed.

Cutting.

Don't be scared of cutting the textile. If it will turn out to small we can always piece it here and there and if it will be to big we will just sew it smaller after trying it on.

We can cut the pattern straight on the textile but if you are not sure make it first from some cheap second hand textile or on the paper.

Sewing part.

We start with sewing all bodice parts together. Than we secure all of the stitches by putting them flat or on the one side with hemming stitch (as in many original garments from medieval times). The most important part is to iron the seams before securing the stitches and right after.

We attach the central gores from the outside of the garment using tiny stitches. The technique is well described in Woven into the earth book. We can make all seams by hand or use a sewing machine for the main ones if you want. Personally I prefer hand stitching.

The sleeves that I made have no buttons but of course you can add them.

We finish the neck line with a hemming stitch and can also add a cord on the edge like in the original garment. I finished mine with hemming stitch.



My thoughts.

Making a exact copy of the garment can be incredibly hard or even impossible. We can for examples use hand woven plant dyed textile and make the whole process even more exciting. Making a historical reconstruction is also about making choices.

To make this dress it took me more or less 30 working hours. Is it a lot? I don't know, but what I know is that for sure it gives a lot of satisfaction and joy to make yourself a garment that would be used during reenacting. It also helps to understand a history of medieval every day life more.

Results.

The final result is a pretty good simple reenactment of the dress. I hope this article will help you to make such a dress for yourself. Im sure even such a simple garment can look stunning when you put your heart in it.



# “SHOULD STITCH A PICTURE IN SILK”

## Professional embroiderers in late-medieval Europe

By Eva-Maria Mair

© ALTE\_FAEDEN

Silk embroidery was an important craft in medieval Europe and London, Paris and some Dutch and German cities became significant production and trade centers. Consequently, guilds emerged to regulate the affairs of their members and care for quality control and educational standards.

These associations of professional embroiderers known as “cullensteckers” (Brügge 1296), “Burduerwerkers” (Antwerpen 1382) or “Sydensticker” (Frankfurt am Main 1377) had quite modern ideas of working conditions. Under the 1292 regulations of the Paris embroiderers, work was forbidden on Sundays, on the four feast days of Our Lady, on the six fast days of the Apostles and disregard was punished with a fine. Also, working hours were restricted to daylight for “work done by candlelight cannot be so well or skillfully done as that done by day.” Although these regulations were aimed at quality assurance, they also protected the apprentices and journeymen from exploitation.

“...if an apprentice is imposed, he/she shall give to the brotherhood one guildler and a quarter of wine”

With the formation of guilds, frameworks for the training of apprentices were also established. In Cologne the apprenticeship lasted six years, in Milan five years, in Paris eight years, reduced to six in 1566. This unusually long apprenticeship periods took into account the broad range of techniques to be mastered and the quality of work that only comes with practice.

The statutes also protected apprentices from abuse or neglect by their masters or mistresses. Files from 1369 London mention Alice Catour, who was apprenticed to Elias Mympe. Because she was beaten and mistreated, her father approached the London mayor and aldermen to have the apprenticeship contract terminated. Alice's apprenticeship contract was revised and embroiderer Mympe paid a fine of 13s. 4d. and got off lightly, since he had not only accepted the girl for less than the required 7 years of apprenticeship but had also neglected to deposit the apprenticeship contract with the authorities.



Another regulation laid down that all masters and mistresses had to be established in their craft: their work must have been judged and accepted by the guild masters, and they must themselves have served an apprenticeship. Often, they would be required to stitch predefined commissions to prove their skills. In 1446 Vienna the following masterpieces were required: “one picture in silk and one raised and with pearls, and a shield with an animal, stitched in silk in eight weeks”.



When searching the records of European cities, some references to women in the embroidery trade can be found.

In 1295 Paris, 93 persons petitioned the Provost to confirm the written statutes regulating the embroidery trade. Only a dozen of them were male.

The Frankfurt guild charters of 1377 expressly granted women and their children who enjoyed municipal citizenship the right to craft as well. Whether they had the same right as male embroiderers to own a workshop with employees and train apprentices is not clear. A redrafting in the 15th century allowed widows of embroidery masters to continue the craft and the workshop, as well as wives of embroidery masters to work in the workshop.

The guild statutes of Munich from 1442 enabled daughters and all virgins who had learned the trade to practice it properly. But none of the surviving documents mentioned a female master, journeyman or apprentice.

The 1583 statutes of Milan's embroiderers' guild (Università) distinguished master embroideresses, who could train apprentice maids, from assemblers, who carried out supervised work. Only in one case could a woman manage a workshop on an equal footing with a man: as the widow of a deceased embroidery master.

The situation was different in Cologne, where silk trade and embroidery were almost exclusively run by women. Written testimonies name several of them, e. g. “coat of arms embroideress” Luthe (1340), Bela, “factrix Stolarum” (1343), Stina de Wupervurde, “stole embroideress” (1384) and Mistress Conrads von Bolhausen (1531).

Women as professional embroiderers are also evidenced by the records of the English royal court. Mabel of Bury St. Edmunds received a commission from King Henry III in November 1239 and in the accounts of the “Great Wardrobe” of King Edward I (1272-1307), a Christiana de Enfield is mentioned several times.

Little is known of the daily businesses of these craftsmen and women, although most cities probably had family dynasties of embroiderers, running their own workshops and passing their skills on to the next generation. They often worked from home, even in the international embroidery center of Milan there were “magistri qui non tenent apothecas apertas” versus embroiderers who owned a workshop and sold their goods there. What has survived from these embroiderers, however, are their magnificent works of art, which are highlights of textile collections all around the world.

# MEDIEVAL BOARD GAMES

## Alquerque

By Andrew Hall

© SANDWICHMEDIEVAL

Probably the most popular game played at the Sandwich Medieval Centre is Alquerque (or as it is also known Qirkat), a game that Draughts/Chequers and many other games around the world such as the Madagascan game Fanorona evolved from and which has a few variations itself.

Although it is possibly a lot older the game first appears in literature late in the 10th century when Abu Al-Faraj al-Isfahani mentioned El-quirkat as it was originally known in his 24-volume Kitab Al-Aghani ("Book of Songs").

When the Umayyads invaded Spain they probably brought El-quirkat with them and it became a popular game in Spain and then the rest of Europe. The rules are included in the "Libro de los juegos" ("Book of games") commissioned by Alfonso X "The Wise" of Castile, Galicia and León in 1283. This book was a Spanish translation of Arabic instructions for a variety of games including various games in the "Tables" family (games related to Backgammon), dice games and chess. This was actually the earliest

European treatise on Chess and amongst the many variations in the book is one called Ajedrex De Los Quatro Timpas (Chess of the Four Seasons), a game for four players using black, white, green and red pieces moved by the roll of dice, representing the four elements and four humors.

By the later Middle Ages people started to play Alquerque on a chess board rather than the original board as shown in our photo and by the Tudor period it had become the new game of Draughts or Chequers.

Amongst the many variations found around the world is Fanarona from Madagascar which is at least 7 centuries old and has 3

variations with 3x3, 5x5 and 9x5 boards. This game was very popular in the Merina kingdom of Madagascar, so much so that it's been claimed Prince Andriantompokoindrindra was so addicted to playing the game that he was said to have decided to ignore a summons from his father King Ralambo to come to court whilst he was playing a game, and therefore lost his inheritance to the throne to his younger brother Prince Andrianjaka.

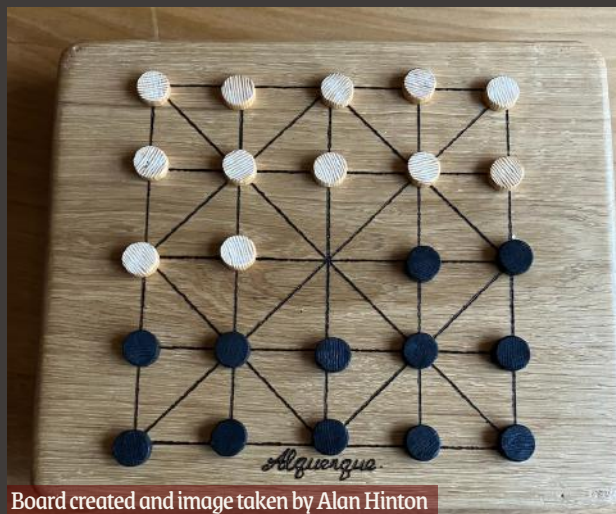
There are many other games based on either basic or expanded Alquerque boards around the world. In Siberia there is a game called Buga-shadara and in South-East Asia and the Indian Subcontinent there are Rimau-rimau, Main tapal empat and Rimau from Malaysia and Bagh-chal from Nepal. Spanish colonists brought the Alquerque board to the New World where it was used for other games such as Komican played by the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina, Adugo played by the Bororo of Brazil and even a four player variation played by the Zuni of New Mexico.

To play Alquerque each player will place their twelve pieces in the two rows closest to them and in the two rightmost spaces in the centre row, the centre space is left clear and is the place the starting player has to move his first piece to. The game is then played in turns and the aim is to move as many of your pieces to the other player's edge whilst taking as many of your opponent's pieces. Pieces can be moved along any line to any adjacent place either forwards, diagonally or sideways but never backwards.

A piece takes an opposing piece by jumping over it into an empty space and multiple capturing jumps (again in any direction along a line except backwards) are allowed, and are actually compulsory with the attacking piece removed if not done (huffing).

The game is completed when all the pieces have moved past each other towards the opponent's end so that no more pieces can be taken, the winner being the player with the most pieces left.

There are a few additional or alternative optional rules which can be included in a game if both players agree, including that no piece can return to a point it has previously occupied and also that once a piece has reached the opponent's rear row it can only be moved to capture an opponent's piece.



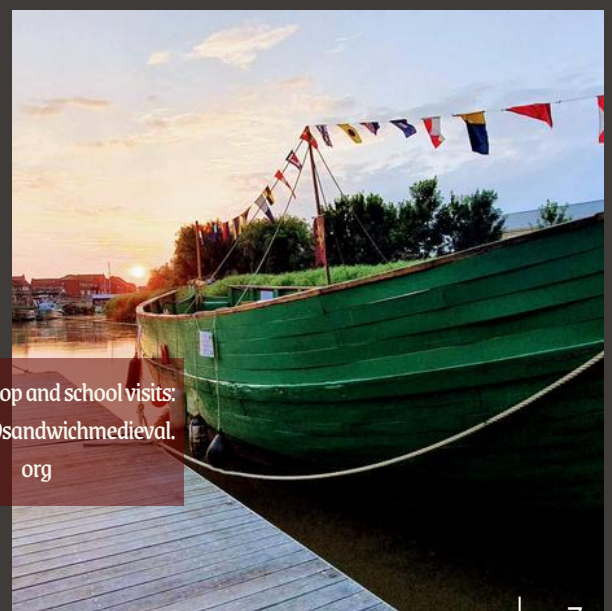
Board created and image taken by Alan Hinton of Alan Hinton Crafts

For general enquiries please contact:

[info@sandwichmedieval.org](mailto:info@sandwichmedieval.org)

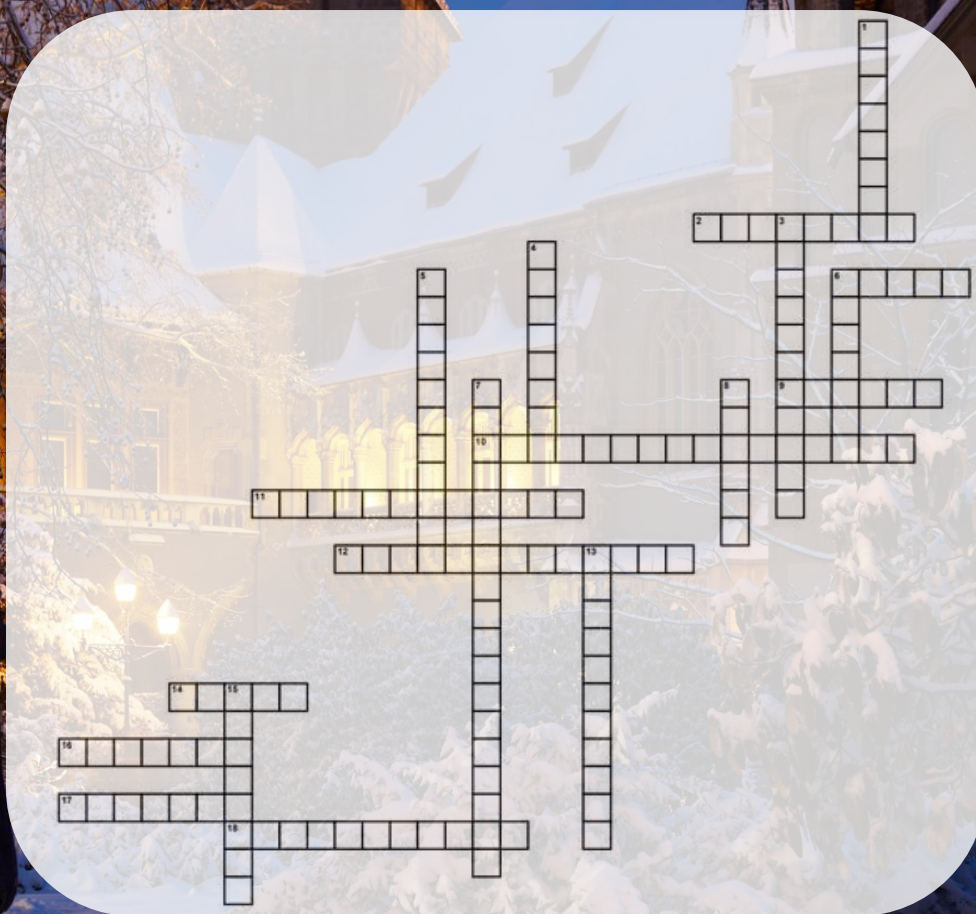
For workshop and school visits:  
[bookings@sandwichmedieval.org](mailto:bookings@sandwichmedieval.org)

org



# CHRISTMAS CROSSWORD

The year is almost a over! So for a little fun, have a go and try to conquer this crossword puzzle!  
Don't forget to share your results with us at @livingmedievalofficial on Instagram!



## Across

- [2] Which English king signed the Magna Carta?
- [6] In the Fifth Crusade, armies from England, Austria, Germany and Hungary tried unsuccessfully to conquer which country?
- [9] Legendary Viking warrior Ragnar Lothbrok was supposedly killed by the King of Northumbria by being thrown into a pit of what?
- [10] The Great Schism of 1054 was the permanent split between the Catholic Church and what?
- [11] Which royal house came to the throne of England with the ascension of Henry II?
- [12] Which pope established the Inquisition?
- [14] Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar is a national hero in Spain for defeating a Muslim army in Valencia in 1094, but what is he better known as?
- [16] Taking the throne in 481, which ruler is generally considered to have been the first king of France?
- [17] In which city was the first European university founded in 1158?
- [18] Where did the first Viking raid in Britain take place?

## Down

- [1] Which Renaissance thinker coined the term 'Middle Ages'?
- [3] What is the infamous general and ruler Temüjin more widely known as?
- [4] Which city was the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate?
- [5] Who was the first Holy Roman Emperor?
- [6] What country did William the Conqueror become king of in 1066?
- [7] Which Medieval European queen is sometimes called the 'Grandmother of Europe' because of all the royal lines she started or marriages she arranged?
- [8] What modern country would you visit to explore the medieval streets of Constantinople?
- [13] The Medieval period is generally thought to have begun in 476 with the fall of which empire?
- [15] What was the name of the knightly code of honour, religious duty and social grace?

# WINTER BLOSSOMS: Tracing the Roots of the Glastonbury Thorn



By Will Davis-Coleman

@CLOAKANDDAGGERPODCAST

If you climb up a long narrow ridge to the south west of the town of Glastonbury in Somerset, you will come across a small tree sapling protected by wooden planks covered with brightly coloured ribbons.

This particular tree was planted in 2022 but it is just the latest descendant in a long line of hawthorn trees dating back, potentially, for thousands of years – possibly to the years just after the death of Jesus Christ.

Glastonbury is a hotbed for legends and miracles – whatever you believe, the place is filled with tales of all kinds. What makes the Glastonbury Thorn so intriguing is that it has a few kernels of truth in its legend – making it tantalisingly difficult to completely debunk.

## JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

It is generally accepted that Christianity reached the British Isles sometime in the 3rd Century CE – brought along the paved Roman roads and onto the merchant cogs and triremes of the Empire. However, there are legends which suggest that Britain was introduced to the faith at its very beginning – thanks to the man whose family tomb Jesus Christ was buried in: Joseph of Arimathea.



Here we leave the biblical texts and move into lore and legend. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth – in his book “Historia Regum Britanniae” written in the 12th century CE, Joseph left the Middle East, taking with him a vial of Christ’s blood and another of his sweat, and travelled to Britain by ship – landing on the south coast of England.

Then Joseph and his followers travelled to Glastonbury in Somerset. When he reached the spot of Wearyall Hill, he plunged his staff into the soil and settled down to rest. When he awoke, his staff had transformed into a hawthorn tree which sprang to life and blossomed despite the winter season. And so, Christianity came to Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth goes on to explain how Joseph converted the Britons – 18,000 in a single day in the town of Wells. He even reportedly converted the local king Ethelbert to the Christian faith.

This tale was certainly given credence by the monks at Glastonbury Abbey. They already stated that the remains of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere were located in their church and the link to such an esteemed friend of Jesus added to their attraction for pilgrims.

## THE THORN’S REVENGE

The original tree which sprang up from Joseph’s staff was cultivated and a number of Hawthorn trees grew in and around the town of Glastonbury. But the original position of the Hawthorn on Wearyall Hill remained intact until the 16th and 17th centuries when the Thorn was directly attacked. The first attack came in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I when a “Saint like Puritan” decided to destroy the Thorn – he managed to sever one of the trunks of the tree before being “miraculously punished” – this punishment came in the form of “cutting his Leg, and one of the Chips flying up... put out one of his Eyes.”

The second attack took place during the reign of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector in the 1650s. Cromwell commanded the Thorn to be cut down as it was regarded as a focus of superstition and “popery”. However, the story goes that the axe man suffered the loss of one of his eyes as the Thorn fell on him. According to legend, the locals cultivated the stump and managed to save the tree.



## A ROYAL CHRISTMAS GIFT

Despite these attacks, the Thorn had begun to be accepted as a part of the mystical fabric of Glastonbury – this was because of its unique winter blossom, unlike common hawthorns which blossom in early summer, the Glastonbury Thorn blooms in May and in December. This was seen as miraculous by medieval folk and its perceived holiness gave it the protection of the Church. Biologically speaking, the Thorn is not a native hawthorn tree but actually originates from the Middle East, this adds credence to the Thorn’s links with Joseph of Arimathea.

The Thorn’s place was fully ensured when James Montague, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, carefully cut a branch of the Thorn and sent it to King James I’s wife Queen Anne at Christmas as a gift. This began a tradition which has survived up until the present day – children who attend the St John School in Glastonbury cut off a blooming branch of the Thorn and send it to the King and it is placed on the Royal Christmas table every year.

To this day, the Thorn flourishes around Glastonbury despite numerous attacks over the centuries, it continues to live on. The attack on sacred trees, however, sadly continues, most recently the Sycamore on Hadrian’s Wall. But even that tree shows signs of new life with new shoots being cultivated for the future.

# MEDIEVAL WASSAIL

Wassail celebrations, a delightful concoction of merriment, music, and mirth, trace their origins to medieval England. Picture this: it's the yuletide season, the air is crisp, and the countryside is blanketed in snow. The word "wassail" itself is derived from the Old English phrase "Wæs hæil," meaning "be in good health" or "be fortunate." So, from the outset, wassailing wasn't just about revelry; it was a wish for well-being.

Our story begins in the medieval orchards, where apple trees slumbered under a white quilt of snow. To awaken these dormant orchards and ensure a bountiful harvest in the coming year, villagers devised a curious tradition: wassailing the apple trees. Armed with bowls of spiced ale, cider, or mead, the community would gather in the orchard on Twelfth Night, the evening of January 5th. This was no ordinary beverage; it was a magical elixir, a spirited blend of warmth and cheer.

As the villagers encircled the oldest apple tree, they would pour a libation of wassail on its roots, offering a toast to the tree's health and a prosperous harvest. To add a touch of whimsy, they would also hang pieces of toast on the branches, a gesture believed to appease the "tree spirits" and encourage their fruitful cooperation. The festivities reached a crescendo with the singing of traditional wassail songs, a cacophony of joyous voices echoing through the winter night.

Wassail carols, with their catchy tunes and humorous lyrics, were an integral part of the celebration. These songs weren't just a means of entertainment; they were a spirited plea to Mother Nature, a whimsical negotiation for a successful growing season. The lyrics often humorously personified the apple trees, cajoling them into producing an abundance of fruit. Villagers believed that the livelier the wassailing ceremony,

the more likely the trees would respond with a plentiful harvest.

The wassail bowl, a central character in these festivities, was a vessel brimming with good cheer. The recipe for wassail varied from region to region, but it typically included a heady mix of heated ale or cider, sweetened with sugar, and spiced with cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg. Sometimes, a generous splash of spirits like sherry or brandy would be added to kick things up a notch. The resulting concoction was a festive brew that could thaw the coldest winter night and infuse the revelers with a hearty dose of holiday spirit.

Wassailing didn't confine itself to the orchards; it spilled over into the villages and manor houses. Here, the celebrations took on a more communal tone, with neighbors and friends joining together to partake in the conviviality.



The wassail bowl became a symbol of shared goodwill, passed from hand to hand as a token of friendship and unity. The clinking of cups and the hearty cries of "Wassail!" echoed through the streets, turning every corner into a festive tableau.

As wassail celebrations evolved, so did the customs associated with them. The Yule log, a massive log traditionally burned during the Twelve Days of Christmas, became intertwined with wassailing. Families would gather around the roaring fire, sharing stories and raising their glasses in a toast to health and happiness. The Yule log, like the wassail bowl, became a focal point of communal warmth and joy.

Over time, wassailing found its way into literature and popular culture, cementing its status as a beloved holi-

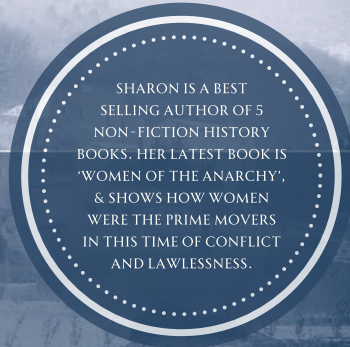
day tradition. Shakespeare himself made reference to wassail in his play "Love's Labour's Lost," immortalizing the practice in the annals of literature. As the centuries unfolded, wassail continued to be celebrated in various forms, adapting to the changing times while retaining its essence of good cheer.

In modern times, wassail celebrations may not involve pouring libations on apple trees, but the spirit of merriment lives on. Communities and families still come together to raise a glass, share laughter, and sing songs that echo the joyful carols of yore. The wassail bowl, now often filled with a spiced punch or mulled wine, remains a symbol of festive conviviality.

So, the next time you find yourself wrapped in the warmth of holiday cheer, sipping a spiced concoction and surrounded by loved ones, remember the whimsical origins of wassail. It's not just a drink; it's a centuries-old tradition that continues to infuse the winter season with a touch of magic and a lot of good health.

Cheers to wassail, the spirited celebration that weaves together the threads of history, folklore, and fun!

**By Elena Sterling**



# UNDER COVER OF A SNOW STORM

By Sharon Bennett Connolly

📍 @THEHISTORYBITS

🌐 HISTORYTHEINTERESTINGBITS.COM

In the mid-12th century, England was riven by civil war as King Stephen and Empress Matilda fought for a crown that was rightfully hers. In 1141, the empress came close to realising her ambition: Stephen had been captured and she was proclaimed 'Lady of the English', but the crown itself eluded her. Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda, had fought back, captured the empress's brother, Earl Robert of Gloucester and negotiated a prisoner swap.

By January 1142, everyone was back where they started, with Stephen on the throne and Empress Matilda still fighting to win it. Except, things were a little more desperate. The empress needed reinforcements and her brother was going to have to plead in person with Geoffrey of Anjou, Matilda's estranged husband.

Earl Robert was reluctant to leave his sister, but with the king lying ill at Nottingham, amid rumours that he was close to death, he decided it would be safe enough to leave for Normandy.

Empress Matilda moved to Oxford to await her brother's return. Although Oxford was not the most secure residence, being close to enemy territory, it was close to London. Her presence there would mean that the empress could act quickly, were Stephen to die. But then, the king unexpectedly recovered.

And went on the offensive, taking Wareham, the castle guarding what would have been Earl Robert's landing place on his return from Normandy. Stephen then marched to Cirencester, where he burned down the castle, before moving on to Bampton and Radcot, both garrisoned by the empress's forces; one was taken by storm while the other surrendered.

By taking the nearby castles, Stephen was isolating the empress at Oxford, cutting off any possible aid. And it was only when this was done that Stephen turned his sights on the empress.

Oxford was a city protected by the surrounding Thames, guarded by a palisade on one side while the formidable castle, with its high donjon, stood sentinel on the other side. According to the Gesta Stephani, the king managed to find a deep ford by which he led his men across the river, 'swimming rather than wading', and launched an attack on the city's defenders. When the defenders pulled back into the city, hoping to close the gates, the king's forces mingled with them and made their way inside, burning buildings, killing those who resisted and capturing those who could offer a ransom, while others were forced to seek shelter in the castle, with the empress.

The king encircled the castle, ordering that it be closely watched, day and night. The empress was not going to escape him again. There was slim chance of reinforcements coming to her aid.



Her uncle David, King of Scots was back in Scotland, her loyal servant Miles of Gloucester, now Earl of Hereford, did not have enough men, and Brian FitzCount had to look to the defence of his own castle at Wallingford. Earl Robert was still far away in Normandy, campaigning with Count Geoffrey while the latter made up his mind about sending reinforcements to aid his wife.

On hearing of the empress's predicament, Robert abandoned his quest for more troops and returned to England, forcing a landing at Wareham and achieving the castle's surrender after a three-week siege. He then ordered a full muster of the empress's forces at Cirencester before marching on Oxford.

Shut up in the castle, with winter upon them, the empress and her forces were cold, hungry and desperate. Entirely cut off from the outside world,

neither supplies nor news had been able to get past the king's blockade since September. In the middle of December, with the ground white with snow and the river frozen, the empress made a desperate gamble.

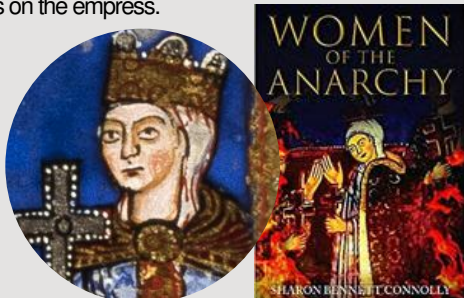
In the dark of the night, presumably dressed in white to camouflage against the blanket of snow, accompanied by just 3 men, she slipped out of a postern gate, passing silently through the enemy encampment. The empress walked 6 miles, crossing the frozen river and traversing the enemy's pickets, to reach Wallingford Castle. The Gesta Stephani remarked that never had he 'read of another woman so luckily rescued from so many mortal foes and from the threat of dangers so great'.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells the story slightly differently, saying that 'in the night she was let down from the tower with ropes and stole out, and she fled and went on foot to Wallingford'.

Though they all tell the story slightly differently, every chronicler eagerly tells of the empress's daring escape from Oxford Castle.

With the empress safely ensconced at Wallingford with Brian FitzCount, the garrison at Oxford could surrender. The king, deprived of his quarry, agreed easy terms with the remaining defenders.

Earl Robert joined the empress. The earl had brought a surprise for his sister: after 3 years apart, she was reunited with her son Henry. Henry's presence changed the focus of Matilda's campaign. She now realised that she would never sit on her father's throne. But there was a new generation to fight for. The empress's purpose was now to secure the throne for Henry in the next reign rather than to displace Stephen in this one.





# UNWRAPPING MYSTERIES

## The Medieval Green Knight and the Spirit of Christmas

By Adrian Bennett

@ADEBEN

In the richness of medieval literature, the tale of the Green Knight stands as a timeless gem, woven with chivalry, magic, and the festive echoes of Christmas. This 14th century poem, rooted in Arthurian legend, unfolds like a winter's fable, combining elements of the supernatural with the traditions of Yuletide celebration. As we delve into the story of the Green Knight, we discover a medieval masterpiece that, despite its centuries-old origins, continues to resonate with the spirit of Christmas.



# THE GREEN KNIGHT EMERGES

The story takes root a late 14th-century alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written by a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Within its verses, we are transported to the legendary court of King Arthur where the Christmas festivities are in full swing. Amid the merriment, a mysterious figure, clad entirely in green, appears uninvited. This enigmatic Green Knight carries an aura of both challenge and magic, setting the stage for a tale that intertwines the spirit of Christmas with the medieval code of chivalry.

The Green Knight's arrival at Camelot brings an unexpected challenge. In a display of Yuletide bravado, he proposes a game: a blow-for-blow exchange where any knight brave enough to strike him may, in turn, receive a return blow in one year's time. Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew and a paragon of knightly virtue, accepts the challenge, not fully grasping the magical consequences that will unfold.

With a single stroke, Gawain beheads the Green Knight, expecting the challenge to conclude. However, the Green Knight, undeterred by his decapitation, calmly picks up his severed head, reminding Gawain of the agreement to meet again in a year's time. The initial blow, symbolic of the cutting winds of winter, becomes a metaphorical journey through the seasons and, ultimately, a quest for honor and truth.

As Gawain embarks on his year-long journey to meet the Green Knight once more, the narrative takes on a pilgrim's progress, echoing the Christian themes prevalent in medieval literature. Gawain's trials and encounters become a spiritual pilgrimage, and the passing of the seasons mirrors the cyclical nature of life and the advent of renewal – themes resonant with both medieval and Christmas traditions.

In the medieval mindset, nature held a profound significance, and the Green Knight's connection to the natural world is evident. His color, green, symbolizes life, growth, and renewal – themes

echoed in the evergreen plants associated with Christmas festivities. The holly, with its sharp leaves and red berries, becomes a recurring motif, serving as a reminder of both the seasonal setting and the perilous nature of Gawain's quest.

Gawain's journey leads him to a mysterious castle on Christmas Eve, adding an extra layer of Yuletide enchantment to the tale. Inside the castle, he encounters a lord and lady who extend hospitality and engage him in a game of exchange. Each day, the lord goes out to hunt while Gawain remains at the castle, and they exchange the spoils of their days upon the lord's return. This sequence becomes a reflection of the give-and-take, the ebb and flow, inherent in the spirit of Christmas.

As Gawain faces the Green Knight once more, the tale takes an unexpected turn with the introduction of the lady's green girdle. Gawain, driven by fear and a desire for self-preservation, conceals the magical girdle, a symbol of his perceived failure to uphold the code of chivalry. The green girdle becomes a powerful emblem, a test of virtue and a reminder that the trials

of the season, both in nature and in the heart, are complex and multifaceted.

In the end, Gawain's honesty prevails. The Green Knight, revealing himself as the lord of the castle, commends Gawain for his overall virtue and truthfulness. The Green Knight's laughter, echoing through the hall, becomes a celebratory melody, a testament to the triumph of honor over deception. The story concludes with a sense of renewal, as Gawain returns to Camelot, bearing the green girdle as a symbol of his newfound wisdom.

The tale of the Green Knight transcends its medieval origins, leaving an indelible mark on literature and the enduring spirit of Christmas. It reminds us that, like the evergreen plants that weather winter's chill, the virtues of honor, truth, and redemption persist through the ages. The Green Knight, with his enigmatic presence and magical challenges, becomes a timeless figure, inviting us to reflect on the complexities of the human experience and the enduring themes of the Christmas season.



In unwrapping the mysteries of the medieval Green Knight, we discover not only a captivating story but also a narrative that intertwines the magic of Yuletide with the timeless quest for honor and virtue. As we gather around the fire during the winter nights, the echoes of Gawain's journey remind us that, like the Green Knight's enduring spirit, the essence of Christmas lies in the perpetual renewal of goodwill, honesty, and the celebration of life's cyclical journey.

A painting from the original manuscript: Public Domain

# REIMAGINING HISTORY

A Reader's Dilemma Explored By Max Sommer

[WWW.PLANTAGENETDISCOVERIES.COM](http://WWW.PLANTAGENETDISCOVERIES.COM)

@PLANTAGENETDISCOVERIES

Hi, I'm Max – a medieval history enthusiast drawn to this fascinating period through the captivating lens of historical fiction.

My question is... how do we reconcile our views of historical figures when authors portray them differently? In this article, I aim to shed some light on understanding the maze of interpretations that authors offer and spotlight some controversial historical characters. This article comes from the heart as my passion for reading has led me to this point, preparing for historical-themed tours featuring many of these very characters. Take a look at my website, and join me on an incredible time-travel adventure.

## POINTS OF INSIGHT

### MERGING FACT & FICTION:

Historical Fiction weaves reality with imagination. Authors draw inspiration from real figures, moulding facts and adding fictional elements to a literary creation that ultimately takes us on a journey back in time.

### DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES:

Embrace unique visions of characters by exploring various author's portrayals of them. It is a challenge for those sticking to a beloved version, and not wanting their view to be tarnished, but trust me, it's worth the journey

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

I encourage you to examine the historical context using the abundance of available information. By comparing historical accounts, primary sources and scholarly research, you can form a well-rounded understanding of these characters.

### AUTHOR'S INFLUENCE:

Character portrayals are shaped by both the author's cultural and social background, and the era. In the same way, an author's personal bias towards a period or event will often shine through.

### EMOTIONAL CONNECTION:

Successful authors create character journeys that make us not just read, but truly 'feel' a novel. The fact is, this history is hundreds of years old, meaning the research available provides facts not feelings. If we embrace these imaginative character arcs, they will link our emotions with an insight into the basics of human nature.

### COMPLEX CHARACTERS:

The beauty of historical fiction lies in the author's ability to develop the complex personalities and conflicting traits of individuals to present a more relatable perspective, after all, historical figures were multi-faceted just like now. We need to discover a more diverse interpretation of these characters, rather than searching for a definitive portrayal.

By understanding such unique angles of a character's personality, motivations and deeds, we can acknowledge these insights, weave them together and marvel at the vibrant tapestry of human history unfolding with every page we turn.

## CONTROVERSIAL CHARACTERS

### RICHARD III:

A myriad of conflicting tales! Was he simply misunderstood or a downright villain? I am biased, thanks to Sharon Kay Penman's 'Sunne in Splendour,' I see Richard very favourably, but Phillippa Gregory and Shakespeare, well not so much, their versions are less sympathetic.

Despite reading many versions of his tale, my stance remains unwavering, however, I certainly understand why opinions on him sway so much.

### SIMON DE MONTFORT:

Now, here is a character I can't really pin down. 'Falls the Shadow' paints him as the epitome of virtue, but other books leave me curious. The father of parliament, sure, but while he certainly did good deeds, were others ignored, under the shadow of Henry III's rule? I find myself teetering on the fence, not really sure.

### ISABELLA OF FRANCE:

Let's talk about a gutsy queen! Invading England and deposing her husband, was a bold move. Yet the stories vary, was she standing up for injustices done to her, or was she a power-hungry 'she-wolf'? I do not believe the latter, but again, it is a tangled web of perspectives.

### WILLIAM DE VALANCE:

I find this man an intriguing character. Most things I have read portray him in a not so favourable light, but after reading Elizabeth Chadwick's portrayal of him in 'Marriage of Lions,' I am not convinced. Has history been unfair to him... I wonder?

### ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE:

Please, before everybody jumps up and down, I admire this incredible woman. But, there are biographies galore, each with a slightly different spin on her story and the history surrounding it. Adultery, rebellion, and more... fact or fiction, well, that depends on what you read.

### JOHN OF GAUNT:

Another figure surrounded by conflicting stories, undoubtedly ambitious, but does that justify the negativity? Was he cruel and ignorant of the common people, certainly the 'Peasants Revolt' makes one believe so. Another controversial topic is his relationship with Katherine Swynford, but was it really any worse than many tales of royal mistresses? Their love story endured for decades, despite many setbacks, could he have been so bad?

In closing, by respecting the author's creativity, we develop a deeper understanding of the individuals who shaped our past and therefore our future. With an open mind, we can see that multiple interpretations can coexist. Regardless of your final opinion, if curiosity is inflamed, the author has excelled!

# 'THE YEAR 1000 – THE NETHERLANDS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE AGES'

This winter, the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden) is going back in time over a thousand years with the grand overview exhibition 'The Year 1000'. The middle of the Middle Ages, the period 900-1100, often seems an episode in history where nothing happened. But for what is now the Netherlands, these are in fact times of great changes in landscape, construction, climate, language and society. The exhibition takes visitors on a colourful time journey through the landscape of this medieval world, with the year 1000 as its final destination.

The journey brings visitors close to the people of this time at the imperial residence in Nijmegen, the cathedral of Utrecht, the treasuries of Maastricht, the Rome of a thousand years ago and the wealth of Byzantium. On display are over four hundred archaeological finds, artefacts and manuscripts from the Netherlands and far beyond. A starring role is reserved for the 'power couple' Empress Theophanu and her husband Otto II. 'The year 1000' is an exhibition for young and old and will be on display from 13 October 2023 through 17

March 2024.

[www.rmo.nl](http://www.rmo.nl)



# CHRISTMAS CROSSWORD

*The Solution.*

The crossword puzzle solution is as follows:

- 1. PETRARCA
- 2. KING JOHN
- 3. EGYPT
- 4. DAMASUS
- 5. SNAKES
- 6. EASTERN - ORTHODOX
- 7. HELIX
- 8. TUKAN
- 9. KEY
- 10. PLANTAGENETS
- 11. POPE GREGORY IX
- 12. EL CID
- 13. CLOVIS I
- 14. BOLOGNA
- 15. LINDISFARNE
- 16. OMANE
- 17. IMPERIE

# living MEDIEVAL

HISTORY, BY THOSE WHO LIVE IT.



PUBLISHED BY

LIVING  
MEDIEVAL



[www.livingmedieval.com](http://www.livingmedieval.com)



@livingmedievalofficial



Search: Living Medieval

[WWW.LIVINGMEDIÉVAL.COM/WRITEFORUS](http://WWW.LIVINGMEDIÉVAL.COM/WRITEFORUS)

FOR ALL BUSINESS ENQUIRIES:  
[INFO@LIVINGMEDIÉVAL.COM](mailto:INFO@LIVINGMEDIÉVAL.COM)