Childhood in Medieval England, *c*.500-1500

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This toy knight comes from a rich harvest of archaeological finds, made in the mudbanks of the River Thames in London during the last 30 years. It was manufactured in about 1300, and illustrates several facets of medieval childhood. Then as now, children liked playing with toys. Then as now, they had a culture of their own, encompassing slang, toys, and games. Then as now, adults cared for children and encouraged their play. An adult made this toy and another adult bought it for a child, or gave a child money to buy it. The toy knight was made from a mould, and produced in large numbers. It probably circulated among the families of merchants, shopkeepers, and craft workers, as well as those of the nobility and gentry. The finds also include toys that girls might have liked: little cups, plates, and jugs, some sturdy enough to heat up water by a fireside. There is even a self-assembly kit: a cupboard cut out of a sheet of soft metal, instead of the plastic that would be used today.

Concepts of childhood

Toys give us a positive view of medieval childhood. Demography, the study of births and deaths, shows more of its darker side. The death rate among medieval children was high by modern standards. It has been suggested that 25% of them may have died in their first year, half as many (12.5%) between one and four, and a quarter as many (6%) between five and nine. There is no evidence that these deaths lessened parental affection and care for children, however, and the interest of adults in children can be traced throughout the middle ages. Medieval people inherited

ideas about human life from the classical world. They thought they knew how infants grew in the womb and developed and matured after they were born. Life was viewed as a sequence of stages—"the ages of man." Infancy up to the age of 7 was viewed as a time of growth, childhood from 7 to 14 as one of play, and adolescence from 14 onwards as one of physical, intellectual, and sexual development.

Little survives about adult attitudes to children during the Anglo-Saxon period from 500 to 1066, although burials show that children were often buried with grave-goods, like adults, and that children with deformities were cared for and enabled to grow up. Information about adult attitudes grows in the twelfth century, an age of law-making in both the Church and in lay society. Making laws involved arrangements for children, because they could not be expected to bear the same responsibilities and penalties as adults. Medieval law-makers tended to place the boundary between childhood and adulthood at puberty, coventionally 12 for girls and 14 for boys. The Church led the way in making distinctions between childhood and adulthood. It came to regard children under the age of puberty as too immature to commit sins or to understand adult concepts and duties. On these grounds they were forbidden to marry, excused from confessing to a priest, and excluded from sharing in the sacrament of the eucharist. Secular justice developed a similar concept of an age of legal responsibility beginning at about puberty, although there are rare references to children receiving adult punishments.

By the thirteenth century scholars based in France, such as Bartholomew Glanville, Giles of Rome, and Vincent of Beauvais, were discussing childhood and children's education in learned writings, and by the fourteenth century children were portrayed in art—especially in scenes of everyday life in illuminated manuscripts. Children seldom feature in literature from England before 1400, although some romances describe how their heroes and heroines were born

and brought up. After that date, however, children's literature begins to survive on a significant scale in the English language. It includes works of instruction, including short works on table manners, moral precepts, and hunting, and a few stories, notably a comic tale in verse called *The Friar and the Boy*. There is also evidence that adolescent children read adult fiction, such as romances, the works of Chaucer, and ballads of Robin Hood.

The upbringing of children

Well-established customs existed for bringing up children. Birth took place in a private chamber, where the mother was attended only by other women. This was followed by baptism, which in the early middle ages was encouraged to take place on the two great Christian festivals of Easter and Pentecost (Whitsuntide). Gradually, however, fears about the salvation of unbaptised children led to the practice of baptising children on the day that they were born, and this was the dominant custom by the twelfth century. At baptism a child was made a member of the Church, given a forename, and provided with three godparents to assist the parents in its upbringing. Forenames were sometimes chosen by parents, reflecting family traditions, but it was common for the chief godparent, who had the same gender as the child, to give it his or her own forename. As a result more than one child in a family might share the same forename.

Babies were breast-fed until they were two or more, usually by their mothers except in noble families where wet nurses were employed. Gradually they were weaned on soft foods. Parents provided care and training, and records of fatal accidents to small children suggest that boys and girls soon became aware of their gender and followed their gender parent in daily tasks. Accidents to small girls often took place around firesides or wells, and those to small boys in the father's working space. Fatal accidents were taken seriously by the authorities, and involved a

coroner's inquest, like sudden deaths of adults. Corporal punishment was in use throughout society and probably also in homes, although social commentators criticised parents for indulgence towards children rather than for harsh discipline. Children were given tasks in keeping with their ages. For younger children this meant looking after their smaller siblings, or running errands. As they grew older they might be allocated lighter domestic or agricultural duties, but they were not capable of doing serious work until about the age of puberty when they began to acquire strength of an adult kind.

Growing up involved acquaintance with religion, but there was little structured education of children in this respect until the Reformation. Parents and godparents were expected to teach them basic prayers in Latin (Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, and later Hail Mary), and how to behave in church. Church law after the twelfth century asked little of children in terms of duties. Only when they reached puberty did they acquire the adult obligations of confessing to a priest at least once a year, receiving the eucharist at Easter, attending church, and paying church dues.

The culture of children

Childhood required special clothes, from infant wrappings to miniature versions of adult dress. In wealthier families there were cradles, walking frames, and specially made toys. The metal toys already mentioned were only a small part of the stock of toys in use. Dolls, known as "poppets," must have been widespread, but they have not survived since they were made of cloth or wood. Children are mentioned making their own toys: boats from pieces of bread, spears from sticks, and small houses from stones. Many games were played, from games of skill with cherry stones or tops to activities such as archery, football, and dancing. The oral culture of children is not recorded until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when scraps of verse and songs are noted in

books, especially school notebooks. These point to the existence of nursery rhymes similar to (but not identical with) those of later times, as well as to children knowing and sharing in the songs and phrases of adults.

Education

The education of children in England can be traced from the seventh century. Initially it centred on the training of boys as monks, girls as nuns, and other boys as "secular clergy"—those clergy who lived in the everyday world and eventually ministered in parish churches. This education was based on the learning of Latin and was usually provided in monasteries and nunneries. Education spread to some of the laity as early as the seventh century, and by the end of the ninth century it often took the form of learning to read and write in English rather than Latin. Schools of a modern kind, free-standing and open to the public, first appear in records in the 1070s and became very numerous thereafter, although monasteries and nunneries continued to do some educational work. Boys were usually sent to school, while girls were taught at home. We cannot say how many children were educated, but the number was substantial and probably grew considerably after about 1200. Education began by learning the Latin alphabet, and many boys and girls proceeded no further, using the skill chiefly to read in their own language, either English or, between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, French. Only a minority of boys went on to learn Latin grammar and to become proficient in the language. Women (even nuns) rarely learnt Latin grammar after 1200, and their abilities in the language were chiefly restricted to being able to pronounce texts from Latin prayer-books in a devout manner, without a full understanding of the meaning.

Work and adolescence

Most children began to do serious work once they reached puberty, at around 12-14. Sometimes this was done at home, assisting in agricultural work or a craft, but it was common to send children away from home at about the age of puberty to be servants to other people. This was reckoned to train and discipline them, give them patrons who could assist their careers, and relieve their parents of expense. Places as servants varied widely, from working on farms or in domestic service to apprenticeships in which one learnt a skilled craft or trade. Apprenticeship tended to exclude the very poor. Boys of the wealthier classes often continued their schooling during their adolescence, especially if they were envisaged as having careers in the Church, law, or administration. Other boys were employed in churches as choristers or clerks. The wealthiest children of all—those of the nobility and more important gentry—were often received into the great households of other nobility or leading churchmen, where they acted as pages or retainers, learnt aristocratic manners, and in some cases underwent training in military skills. Although some aristocracy married in the teens, the population as a whole did not do so until the mid twenties. Entry to Church careers also tended to be late, ranging from the mid teens in some religious houses up to twenty-four, the age of ordination as a priest. It followed that from puberty until the mid twenties there was a long period in which children were partly yet not fully independent, away from home but not in households of their own. Like modern adolescents they bonded with others of their own gender, leading in towns to the formation of gangs of youths, and gradually made links with the opposite sex.

Medieval childhood was a rich and varied state, since children varied from one another as much as adults did. It differed chiefly from modern western society in its mortality and in the fact that many young people started serious work at an earlier age. Most of what we associate with

childhood, however, existed for children in the middle ages: upbringing at home, play, special treatment according to age, and training for adult life and work. The concentration of historians on adults in the middle ages does insufficient justice to the fact that about one third of the population was usually under the age of 14.

Further Reading

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