

Dates in 13th century records

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Essential reference

A handbook of dates for students of British history, ed. CR Cheney, new edition, revised by Michael Jones (RHS, London 2000). This book tells you everything you need to know about regnal years, law terms, saints' days and the calculation of Easter, with calendars for every year.

Grammar

In classical Latin, time is expressed with the accusative for duration – 'time how long' – and the ablative for 'time when' and 'time within which'. In medieval Latin, dates are given in the ablative, but can be expressed in several different ways.

Years

There are a number of ways of expressing the year, sometimes used in conjunction with one another:

Years AD

The familiar way of expressing the year AD (or the year of grace, the year of the Incarnation) is used in chronicles, letters and some official documents. The only problem is uncertainty as to when the year begins.

Matthew Paris, for example, begins the year on 25 December (each year in the *Chronica Majora* begins with the number Anno Domini, then the regnal year, then a brief mention of where the king spent Christmas). The French chancery began the year from Easter. Bede, in his history, used a year beginning in September. More commonly, the year begins on 25 March, Lady Day or Annunciation. Everything you could possibly want to know about this, and more, in:

R.L. Poole, 'The beginning of the year in the middle ages', in his *Studies in Chronology and History* (Oxford 1934)

New Year's Day/Feast of the Circumcision (1st January). During the 13th century an increasing number of people began to consider the beginning of January as the start of their year. (Note that in England January did not become the official start of the New Year until the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in 1752). By the mid-13th century 1st January had become an occasion for secular celebration and, in particular, a time for gift-giving. The rationale behind this can be traced back to antiquity, where suppliants made votive offerings to Janus, God of beginnings, in order to avoid hardship in the year ahead. In the 14th and 15th centuries, 1st January was *the* day to give and receive. The so-called feast of fools, where social/political roles were inverted for the sake of fun (i.e. the boy bishop), was also held on 1st January. The Church, as you can imagine, was perturbed by these pagan lapses. In the mid 6th century they introduced the feast of the Circumcision in an attempt to 'Christianise' 1st January. But as you can gather from the above talk of feasts and gift exchange, it did not work. (Bishop Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln, ever the kill-joy, tried to prohibit the feast of fools in his

Statutes (c.1236)). The literature on New Year, which deals with the significance of the date and the political importance of gift-giving, is now extensive; some highlights: M. Meslin, *La fête des kalendes de janvier dans l'empire romain: Étude d'un rituel de Nouvel An* (Brussels, 1970); H. H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (London, 1981); I. S. Gilhus, 'Carnival in Religion: The Feast of Fools in France', *Numen*, 37 (1990), 24-5; B. Buettner, 'Past Presents: New Year's Gifts at the Valois Courts, ca. 1400', *The Art Bulletin*, lxxxiii (2001), 598-625.

Regnal years

Most official and legal documents are dated by the regnal year (if they show the year). Up to and including Henry III, this year runs from the anniversary of the king's coronation; as Edward I was abroad when he succeeded, his first regnal year began four days after his father's death. For the 13th century, in principle we only have to know three dates:

1 John begins 27 May 1199 (Ascension Day);

1 Henry III begins 28 October 1216 (Feast of SS Simon and Jude);

1 Edward I begins 20 November 1272 (Feast of Edmund, King and Martyr).

From these, it is possible to translate any date expressed in regnal years to AD (bearing in mind that Ascension Day is a movable feast). In practice, it is much easier to look it up in Cheney.

Other rulers used their regnal years, and letters from popes are similarly dated by pontifical years, starting from their coronation. Bishops too used their years in office. For lists of bishops and office-holders, such as justiciars, see:

Handbook of British chronology, ed EB Fryde et al, 3rd edition (RHS, London 1986).

Exchequer years

Just to make things more interesting, the Exchequer used an accounting year which ended at Michaelmas, 29 September. Accounts such as the pipe rolls are known by the regnal year in which the account ends (the pipe roll for 7 Henry III covers the year to Michaelmas 1223, so that it actually includes one month of the sixth and 11 months of the seventh regnal year). This is sometimes spelled out – eg a memoranda roll headed "Communia de termino Sancti Michaelis anno regni regis Henrici filii regis Johannis xli^o incipiente xli^o."

The Exchequer year was divided into four terms:

Michaelmas, beginning the morrow of (ie, the day after) Michaelmas;

Hilary, beginning the morrow of Hilary (St Hilarius, 13 January);

Easter, beginning the morrow of the close of Easter (the first Sunday after Easter);

Trinity, beginning the morrow of Trinity Sunday (the first Sunday after Pentecost, ie eight weeks from Easter Sunday).

Indictions

A system of numbering years, based on cycles of 15 years beginning in 312 AD, with the year usually running from 24 September. Fortunately, seldom found except in documents from the papacy and the Empire, where it is used in conjunction with other methods of dating – eg a letter of 1261 to Henry III from his brother Richard as King of the Romans: "Datum Berkhamsted, vicesimo tertio die Octobris, indictione quinta, regni nostri anno quinto."

Dates

As with years, there are several ways of expressing dates within the year:

Day and month

The straightforward method, as in the example above, with an ordinal number (words or numerals) and *die* in the ablative, plus the month in the genitive. This is found in most contexts. Days of the week are expressed with the Latin terms *dies dominica*, *lune*, *martis*, *mercurii*, *jovis*, *veneris*, *sabbati*.

Saints' days

Dating by the chief festivals of the church calendar was of course favoured in ecclesiastical documents, and often in legal documents (see below). There are feasts for many days of the year, and other days can be named as "the eve of ..." or "the Saturday after ..." – so the only practical advice is to resort to Cheney (looking out for such difficulties as John the Baptist's two feasts, his nativity and decollation). The feasts that crop up most often are probably the quarter days: Christmas, Lady Day, Midsummer or Nativity of John the Baptist (24 June), and Michaelmas.

Roman calendar

Papal bulls and some other ecclesiastical documents are dated using the Roman calendar. The months are the familiar ones, but days are numbered by counting backward from three key points in each month. The Kalends is the first day of each month; the Nones the 5th day, and the Ides the 13th of most months (but "In March, July, October, May, the Ides fall on the 15th day", and the Nones on the 7th). Just to add to the fun, the counting backwards is inclusive, so that, for example, our 29 January is *iv kal. Feb.* As for leap years – don't ask.

The legal calendar

The law courts followed their own calendar. Legal records are generally dated by the regnal year, and business was divided into four terms, Michaelmas, Hilary, Easter and Trinity (as in the Exchequer, but each beginning one week later).

Documents (such as final concords) are often dated by return days. Return days were also used to fix the date for resuming an adjourned case, or to specify when a litigant should appear. These are not individual days, but periods (usually a week) within the law term, beginning with that day, or the day following if the day is a Sunday. For example, there are eight return days in Michaelmas term:

octaves of Michaelmas (begins 6 October);

quindene of Michaelmas (13 October);

three weeks after Michaelmas (20 October);

one month after Michaelmas (27 October);

morrow of All Souls (2 November);

morrow of Martinmas (12 November);

octaves of Martinmas (18 November);

quindene of Martinmas (25 November).

The octaves and quindene are periods of eight and 15 days, counting inclusively – ie, one and two weeks. The dates of Easter and Trinity terms of course vary from year to year. There is a list of term dates for every year in Cheney, and far more detail about the legal calendar in:

Paul Brand, 'Lawyers' time in England in the later Middle Ages', in *Time in the medieval world*, ed. Chris Humphrey and WM Ormrod (York 2001).

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