

Early modern Europe: an introduction



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Welcome to early modern Europe	6
2 When was the early modern period?	7
3 What do we mean by Europe?	9
4 What were the features of the early modern period?	10
5 Early modern Europe: historical approaches	13
6 Early modern Europe: themes	14
6.1 Society and social order	14
6.2 Religion: Reformation and Counter-Reformation	19
6.3 Work and trade	25
6.4 Bodies, health and disease	29
6.5 Knowledge and ideas	32
Conclusion	36
Keep on learning	36
Glossary	37
References	39
Further reading	39
Acknowledgements	40

Introduction

The early modern period, stretching from 1500 to 1780, is one of the most engaging periods of history. Beginning with the upheavals of the Reformation, and ending with the Enlightenment, it was a time of fundamental change in society, religion, ideas and everyday life, but also one of strong continuities with earlier times. This free course, *Early modern Europe: an introduction*, provides an introduction to the early modern period in Europe, exploring how historians have defined and approached the period, and analysing the key aspects of the time.

Please note that terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of the course.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*A223 Early modern Europe: society and culture, 1500 to 1780*](#).

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- identify the fundamental features of the early modern period and understand the problems of defining the early modern period
- appreciate that there are different approaches to the study of historical periods
- understand what evidence we can obtain from historical sources used in the study of early modern Europe.

1 Welcome to early modern Europe

You will begin the study of early modern Europe with an account by Richard Pococke, an English visitor to Venice on Ascension Day (the Christian festival marking the day when Christ is believed to have ascended into heaven) in 1734. (Figure 1 shows the ceremony in 1730.) There are some unfamiliar words here. The Doge was the elected ruler of Venice, and the procurators were officials of the city. The Pope's nuncio was a diplomat sent from the Vatican. There is also a phrase in **Latin**, 'testimonium perpetui dominii', which is a misquotation of the ceremonial words *Desponsamus te, mare, in signum veri perpetuæ domini* ('We wed thee, sea, in the sign of the true and everlasting Lord').

We saw the ceremony of the Doges marrying the sea one of the finest sights in the world. About 9 I saw the Doge at Mass in the chapel of the Palace with the Nobles, thence they went in procession to the Bucentaur or fine Galley, with flags displayed, the sword of state going after the Doge before the Procurators and head Nobles, the Popes Nuncio on the right of the Doge, and the Emperors Ambassador [...] on the left [...] the Doge went in to the Bucentaur [...] being sett off shes rowd by 44 oars, two fine large Galleys of the state row at some distance after, the boats of ambassadors keep near the stern and many thousand Gondolas all about, musick in several boats, the bells all ringing the ships firing as it passd by [...] thus they went above a mile to the Isle of St Nicolas where the army of the state were drawn up [...] the vessel turnd, and [the Doge] [...] threw the ring in to the sea making use of words to this purpose by this ring I marry the sea in testimonium perpetui dominii, on which all the Guns fird, and they returnd to St Nicolas and landing went in procession to the church where mass was celebrated solemnly by the Bishop calld the Patriarch of Venice.

(Quoted in Redford, 1996, pp. 60–1)



Figure 1 Giovanni Antonio Canaletto, *Return of the Bucintoro on Ascension Day*, c.1730, oil on canvas, 182 x 259 cm. Aldo Crespi Collection, Milan, Italy. Photo: Aldo Crespi Collection/Bridgeman Images.

What was your response to reading this passage? It probably prompted many questions. How can you marry a city to the sea, and why would you want to? Why was this ceremony so significant that important people like ambassadors and thousands of Venetian citizens followed the procession?

By the end of this course you should be able to answer at least some of these questions – not because you will spend a lot of time studying festivals in Venice, but because you will explore the fundamental aspects of life in early modern Europe, including the role of religion, the structure of society, the organisation of work and trade, and developments in knowledge and ideas. This gives you a set of tools to understand early modern life, including its apparently strange and dramatic public rituals.

This course asks some very basic questions – What do we mean by ‘early modern’? What was ‘Europe’ at this time? – and introduces you to a set of themes that will help to structure your understanding. So, it’s time to leave Venice and the Doge’s barge, and turn to early modern Europe, its society and culture.

2 When was the early modern period?

The term ‘early modern’ is an example of periodisation: dividing the long expanse of past time into ages or periods. Periods can be defined in different ways. The reign of a

monarch or family is one way: 'Tudor England' refers to the time when England was ruled by monarchs from the Tudor family. Historians also talk about particular chronological periods, such as 'the Sixties', referring to the decade of the 1960s – although, in fact, most historians would stretch this period to include the late 1950s and the first years of the 1970s. This slightly cavalier approach to dates reflects a key aspect of periodisation: each historical period has some fundamental features of society, culture, politics and ideas that give the time an underlying unity and set it apart from earlier and later times. Historians' definition of 'the Sixties' reflects a set of important social and cultural features that do not fit neatly into the decade. This tension between finding a convenient set of defining dates and the underlying characteristic features was caricatured by the writer George Orwell (1903–1950) when he recalled his history lessons at school, where 'in 1499, you were still in the Middle Ages, with knights in plate armour riding at one another with long lances, and then suddenly the clock struck 1500, and you were in something called the Renaissance' (quoted in Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 18).

The beginning of the early modern period

So when does the early modern period begin and end? The beginning of the early modern and thus the end of the medieval period (also called the Middle Ages) is associated with a group of fundamental changes that occurred in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

- In the field of ideas, this time saw a rebirth of interest in the writings of scholars from ancient Greece and Rome and a new emphasis on the use of observation as the basis of knowledge. This series of developments, called the **Renaissance**, in turn led to new ideas such as the model of the solar system with the sun at the centre while the planets revolved around it, proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543).
- The spread of these new ideas was aided by the development of printing using movable type, devised by Johannes Gutenberg (c.1398–1468) in the 1450s.
- There was also a significant change in the economy, with a decline in the number of people holding land under the **feudal system**. Instead of getting access to land in return for military service or unpaid labour, farmers paid rent in goods or money.
- In religion, the power of the **Catholic Church** was challenged through criticism of its theology and practices, which ultimately led to the emergence of new **Protestant** churches.
- Finally, around the same time, Europeans discovered cultures beyond Europe; the best-known voyage was that led by Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) which began the colonisation of the Americas.

The end of the early modern period

The end of the early modern period and the beginning of the modern is associated with two major developments. The **French Revolution**, a period of major political upheaval lasting from 1789 to 1799, threatened to overturn the traditional structure of society, where power was concentrated in the hands of the monarch, the nobles and the church. While the social order was not destroyed, the French Revolution did open the door to the creation of a new political culture in the nineteenth century, with the expectation that ordinary people had some representation in government. Around the same time, the old

power sources for all forms of work – the muscle power of men, women and animals (mainly horses) – were gradually replaced by engines powered by steam. This allowed the creation of machines and the production of goods on a scale never before imagined. The **Industrial Revolution**, entailing the shift of production from households and small workshops to large factories, brought with it huge social changes, including the rapid growth of towns. While historians generally agree that the fundamental change brought about by these events marked the boundaries of the early modern period, they differ on exactly which developments belong to the early modern. This course uses 1780 as its end point, as I believe that the upheavals of the French and Industrial Revolutions belong in the modern period. But other historians opt for a slightly later end date and include the beginnings of industrialisation, the establishment of political freedoms following the French Revolution and the expansion of mass communication as part of the early modern (Kümin, 2014, p. 2).

3 What do we mean by Europe?

Before you examine the characteristic features of the early modern period in Europe, you need to think about what we mean by 'Europe'. It is difficult to know exactly where to draw the boundaries of the continent: while the northern, southern and western edges are defined by oceans and seas, there is no geographical feature that clearly marks the eastern boundary of Europe. However, just as we can define the dates of the early modern period by certain features, we can define Europe by certain common characteristics – a shared Christian faith (although there were significant numbers of both Jews and Muslims in Europe), and an intellectual tradition based on ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. As with defining the early modern period, historians have slightly different conceptions of the boundaries of early modern Europe. Many focus on western Europe, while others include Russia and eastern Europe, where people followed the Christian Orthodox faith.

Activity 1 The map of early modern Europe

This should take around 20 minutes

Early modern Europe was divided into very different states. The best way to get a grasp of these is to look at a map.

Part A

Take a few minutes to look at the [interactive map](#) and note down anything that strikes you as being very different from a modern map of Europe.

Discussion

You were probably struck by the mass of small states found in modern-day Germany and Italy. Other states look more familiar – France and Spain occupied much the same area as in the present day, although the boundaries weren't exactly the same. You can also see that some areas around the margins of the map didn't fall under the control of any state or government.

Part B

When moving around the map you will see that boundaries are highlighted. Clicking anywhere in an area will display a label which gives you more information about who ruled that region.

Use [the interactive map](#) to look at the labels on the different parts of the Italian peninsula. What do you notice about these states?

Discussion

You should have found a number of different types of states in the Italian peninsula – such as the Papal States (ruled by the Pope), the kingdom of Naples (ruled by a monarch) and the republic of Siena (centred on the city of Siena). Part of the territory was ruled by France and the map shows the boundaries of all the areas controlled by the French king. A number of states were made up of such scattered areas of land, distributed across the continent. Take a moment to look for other fragmented states.

Part C

Use [the interactive map](#) to trace the changes in national boundaries by moving the slider on the timeline between 1500 and 1800. How would you describe the overall changes to the map of Europe? (You will need to move the slider back and forth a few times to compare the maps.)

Discussion

The most striking difference between 1500 and 1800 is the shrinking of the area of small states in the region around modern-day Germany. This was part of a wider shift from many small states to a small number of large states – you may have noticed that the separate kingdoms in Britain merged into one and that the number of states in Italy also decreased.

4 What were the features of the early modern period?

As you read earlier, the beginning and end of the early modern period are marked by important changes in ideas, society, religion, economics and politics. But what about the period itself: what aspects of life and events characterise the time between 1500 and 1780?

Activity 2 What do you know about early modern Europe?

This should take around 5–10 minutes

Take a few minutes to jot down anything you know about the period 1500–1780: any events that happened or people who lived between these dates. You may have encountered early modern history in many ways: as part of formal study, through books you have read for your own interest, through visits to buildings from that period, or through history programmes on the radio or television. Then try to put these events

and people under the headings of ideas, society, religion, economics and politics. Don't worry if nothing much comes to mind – just skip to the discussion.

Discussion

Everyone will have a different list of things. I've read a lot of books about early modern Europe while preparing materials for this course, but apart from that I've watched and read some material just out of interest. Over the last few months I've seen television programmes about the palace of Hampton Court and the lives of women in the eighteenth century. You may have seen something similar – Henry VIII (1491–1547, reigned 1509–1547) and Elizabeth I (1533–1603, reigned 1558–1603) are popular topics for television history. I've also heard a radio dramatisation of the diary of Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) that included an account of the Great Fire of London in 1666. A number of years ago I lived in Edinburgh, which has many buildings surviving from the early modern period, including the New Town, which was begun in the 1770s.

So, to summarise, I've come across materials that tell me something about early modern society through the lives of elite and ordinary people, something about politics through accounts of royal power, as well as a depiction of a major event; and I have some knowledge of an early modern city.

What do historians identify as the important features?

How does your knowledge of early modern Europe compare with the accounts of the period given by historians?

The first thing to note is that historians' understanding of what characterises early modern Europe has changed over time. If you look at an old textbook, you will find that the early modern (as the name suggests) was seen as a forerunner of the modern period: a time of transition between the medieval and the modern. Historians looked for changes that foreshadowed important aspects of modern life, such as the rise of democracy, the tolerance of a range of religious beliefs and the movement of people from the countryside into towns (a process known as **urbanisation**). This approach has now been abandoned. The problem with reading history backwards – looking for the origins of later change – is that it gives a skewed picture which emphasises those features that are seen as important in modern life, but ignores other developments which might have been significant in the lives of early modern people. Historians now try to study the early modern as a period that was important in its own right, different from, but with some continuities with, both medieval and modern times.

The quickest way to gain a sense of what present-day historians see as the distinctive features of the early modern is to turn to recent textbooks. You are not expected to read a textbook at this point – all you need is a quick overview, and the best way to get that is by using a technique called 'gutting' a book. This is an extremely useful skill. As an example, you'll look at Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks' *Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789*, a textbook which is used on many university courses. Looking at the contents pages (one of which is reproduced in Figure 2), you can see she has chosen to split the period into two (1450–1600 and 1600–1789) but to use the same chapter titles in each half. These give a good sense of the areas of history that she thinks are important in the early modern. The subheadings give a more detailed sense of the important topics and events of the period.

There is also an opening chapter which gives a starting point, but you can leave that aside.

viii CONTENTS	CONTENTS ix
PART II 277	
8 Individuals in society, 1600–1789 279	Music 399
The social body: orders and classes 281	Chapter summary 403
The writing body: letters and diaries 288	Questions 405
The inner body: emotions and passions 292	Further reading 405
The studied body: anatomy and medical theory 295	11 Religious consolidation and renewal, 1600–1789 408
The treated body: medicine and public health 298	Protestant state churches 412
The reproducing body: childbirth and contraception 302	Church and state in Catholicism 415
The deviant body: sex crimes and scandals 304	Spiritualism and pietism 420
Chapter summary 310	Moravians and Methodists 423
Questions 311	Gender issues in western Christianity 425
Further reading 312	Eastern Orthodoxy 427
9 Politics and power, 1600–1789 314	Witchcraft 433
Absolutism in theory and practice 317	Judaism 440
Warfare and alliances 321	Islam 445
France 328	Chapter summary 448
Spain and Portugal 335	Questions 449
The British Isles 338	Further reading 449
The Dutch Republic 344	12 Economics and technology, 1600–1789 452
The Ottoman Empire 347	Agricultural change and rural protests 456
Hapsburg lands 349	Population growth 463
Brandenburg-Prussia 351	Proto-industry and manufactories 469
Sweden and Poland 352	Industry and the Industrial Revolution 475
Russia 356	Commerce, banking, and money 484
Enlightened rulers 358	Chapter summary 487
Chapter summary 360	Questions 488
Questions 361	Further reading 488
Further reading 361	13 Europe in the world, 1600–1789 490
10 Cultural and intellectual life, 1600–1789 364	Explorations 494
Learned societies, salons, and newspapers 368	Trade and colonies in the Indian Ocean 499
Ancient authorities and new methods in science 373	Trade and colonies in the Caribbean 505
The revolution in astronomy 376	Trade and colonies in the Atlantic 512
Mathematics, motion, and the mind of God 378	Colonies, difference, and race 519
Reason, knowledge, and property 381	The effects of colonialism 526
Natural rights and their limits in the Enlightenment 383	Chapter summary 531
Literature and drama 389	Epilogue 532
Art and architecture 393	Questions 534
	Further reading 535
	Index 539

Figure 2 Contents page for Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. (2006) *Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789*, Cambridge University Press.

Professor Wiesner-Hanks identifies six key areas of study in the early modern; below is a summary of the events or topics that come under each heading. Don't worry if there are some terms you don't understand at present.

- *Individuals*: stages of the life cycle – childhood, marriage and so on – family, health, society and self-expression (through diary writing).
- *Politics and power*: military power, government, styles of ruler – absolute and enlightened monarchs – explored in different countries.
- *Cultural and intellectual life*: education, art, music, literature, political theory, science, the Enlightenment.
- *Religious reform, consolidation and renewal*: the Reformation, religious wars, Protestant churches, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, witchcraft, church and state.
- *Economics and technology*: population growth, agriculture, manufacturing, banking, capitalism, industry, urban life, poverty.
- *Europe in the world*: exploration and colonies in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Activity 3 How does the textbook compare to your knowledge of early

modern Europe?

This should take around 5–10 minutes

Compare the picture presented in the textbooks and your knowledge of the early modern period (or the discussion in Activity 2 of my knowledge gained from popular sources). Are they similar? How do they differ?

Discussion

The information I acquired from popular history is very different from that presented in the textbook. I didn't have any knowledge about religion or economics. I had gained some insights into the social hierarchy in early modern Britain and politics at royal courts. Overall, I would say that these sources gave some understanding of the important features of the early modern period, but it is very patchy. I'm not surprised: television and radio programmes focus on engaging events and spectacular settings.

Your response will be different, but you should have discovered that you know something about early modern Europe even at this stage of this course.

Activity 4 *The World We Have Lost*

This should take around 15 minutes

Peter Laslett was one of the first historians to use population data to try to understand the life of ordinary people in the early modern world. (He also played a part in the planning of The Open University.) An extract from the opening chapter of his book *The World We Have Lost* (1965) gives a vivid picture of the differences between the early modern and the modern world.

Read the following extract from Peter Laslett, 'English society before and after the coming of industry' and then take a few minutes to reflect on it. What did you find surprising in Laslett's account?

Discussion

Your view may well be different from mine, but I noted the small scale of the early modern world, such as Laslett's comment that St Paul's Cathedral was then the largest building in England. I also noticed the presence of servants within ordinary families – they were not just a feature of large, wealthy households.

5 Early modern Europe: historical approaches

There are different accounts of the history of early modern Europe. Every historian brings a slightly different expertise to their work. They focus their research on different areas of history such as those we've identified in the textbook: political, economic, cultural or religious history. Each area makes use of a particular range of source materials.

Economic historians make use of numerical data, while cultural historians draw on a wide range of sources, from texts such as diaries or letters, to objects such as pottery or jewellery. Within each area historians specialise in the history of particular periods, areas or events. Even when writing a textbook where authors want to give students an overview

of a period, their particular understanding will influence what they choose to include, what they skim over or treat in greater detail.

So, what picture of early modern Europe is presented in this course? The approach is that of social and cultural history. Social history, which developed in the mid-twentieth century, is a broad field of study that explores the everyday life of people, both individuals and groups, elite and poor, and the relationships between them. It overlaps with cultural history, which explores how people in the past thought about themselves and their world. So a social historian looking at the Ascension Day ceremony in Venice might explore what type of people visited the event, or how the order in which participants marched in the procession reflected their social status. A cultural historian might focus on the elements of ritual – what functions were served by enacting a marriage between a city and the sea, or what the decoration of the Doge's barge was intended to convey

6 Early modern Europe: themes

When studying any historical period, it helps to break up the topic into more manageable chunks. Sometimes, periods can be subdivided into short time periods – perhaps the reign of different monarchs. The early modern period is usually broken down into themes that capture key features of the time.

6.1 Society and social order

Early modern society was hierarchical. According to the French lawyer Charles Loyseau (1564–1627), the division of people into different ranks was crucial to social stability:

Because we cannot live together in equality of condition, it is necessary that some command and others obey ... Sovereign lords command all within their state, addressing their commands to the great; the great [address their commands] to the middling, the middling to the small, and the small to the people ... Thus by means of these multiple divisions and subdivisions, the several orders make up a general order, and the several Estates a state well ruled.

(Loyseau, [1610] 1987, p. 14)

Although society remained hierarchical throughout the early modern period, the structure of that hierarchy changed over time.

Activity 5 Social structure

This should take around 5–10 minutes

Here are two definitions of the structure of society. The first is an extract from Loyseau's *Traité des ordres et simples dignités* ('Treatise on orders and plain dignities'); the other is from an article by Defoe (1660–1731), a novelist and social commentator, in an eighteenth-century newspaper.

Read the two quotations then answer the following questions:

- How many groups or orders do Loyseau and Defoe identify?
- What is the basis for their division of society?

Loyseau, *Traité des ordres et simples dignités*

Since the people is a body with several heads, it is divided by orders, Estates, or particular occupations. Some are dedicated particularly to the service of God, others to protecting the state by their arms, others to nourishing and maintaining it through peaceful occupations. These are our three orders or Estates General of France: the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate.

(Loyseau, [1610] 1987, p. 14)

Daniel Defoe, 'Orders of society'

The *great*, who live profusely.

The *rich*, who live very plentifully.

The *middle sort*, who live well.

The *working trades*, who labour hard but feel no want.

The *country people*, farmers, &c., who fare indifferently.

The *poor*, that fare hard.

The *miserable*, that really pinch and suffer want.

(Defoe, [1709] 1971, p. 37)

Discussion

Loyseau describes three orders, based on their social function: the first estate, or clergy, who pray for the souls of the others; the second estate, the nobility, who protect the others from violence; and the third estate, or peasantry, who work to provide food for everyone. Defoe, however, identifies seven groups based on their relative wealth and hence their living conditions.

Loyseau's description of three orders – clergy, nobles and peasants – dates back to the medieval period. It oversimplifies the social order, as there were significant variations in wealth and status within each group. For example, the nobility ranged from monarchs, some of whom were extremely wealthy, with many castles and palaces, to minor nobles who owned only a small estate with a single large house. It also leaves out merchants, traders and manufacturers: groups which grew in numbers and importance over the early modern period (Figure 3). Defoe's description of seven gradations of wealth and status recognises this fragmentation of society, although most contemporary authors identified three groups: the elite, the middle or middling order (also often referred to as the middle sort, as seen in the extract from Defoe) and the poor.

Groups within early modern society are usually described as ranks, groups or orders, but not classes. 'Class' is the term used by historians working on the nineteenth century and refers to groups within industrial society, divided by their relationship to the means of production.

While nobles dominated the social elite in the sixteenth century, owning much of the land and wealth, by the eighteenth century they were joined in the social elite by wealthy merchants and bankers. Some merchants were much richer than the nobles; for instance the Fugger family in Germany earned huge amounts from their mines and lent vast sums of money to the nobility.



Figure 3 Gillis van Tilborgh, *A Noble Family Dining*, c.1665, oil on canvas, 81 x 101 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary. Photo: MFA, Budapest/Bridgeman Images. The image shows a wealthy Dutch family in their comfortable home, surrounded by valuable possessions.

In the seventeenth century a new 'middling order' emerged. This group was made up of people with a wide range of occupations, such as smaller merchants, tradesmen, shopkeepers and prosperous farmers. It is hard to define the boundaries of the middle order, but members were recognisable by a group of characteristics. Members of the order employed staff to help in their businesses and households. They owned or rented a comfortable property, and expected to eat and drink well. They were educated, had good manners, paid taxes, took on social responsibilities, such as contributing to charities to care for the poor, and filled many roles in local government.

Below the middle order came the poor: a large and diverse group. Most poor people worked at some unskilled occupation – as market traders, labourers or laundrywomen, for example – but that work might be irregular. When they had no work, they were reduced to begging for food or money. The poor lived in cramped and often squalid dwellings, ate

simple food, and had little or no schooling and few resources. Certain types of people were more likely to end up poor, including the old, the young, unmarried mothers, and the sick or disabled, all of whom found it difficult to find regular employment or work that paid a good wage.

Society was also divided along gender lines. Early modern Europe was a **patriarchal** society, where men held greater power than women. Men dominated the worlds of trade and of politics, but women were far from powerless. As parents, they had power over their children. Wealthy women ran large households, and the wives of nobles looked after their husbands' estates while they were away on business or at war. A number of queens ruled in their own right during the early modern period, including Elizabeth I of England and Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689, reigned 1632–1654).

Early modern society was distinguished by a greater measure of mobility up and down the social scale than in medieval times. Successful merchants could become immensely rich, but misfortune or mismanagement could result in bankruptcy. A hard-working **journey-man** might establish a successful business, invest wisely, and ensure that his sons went to university and his daughters married well. Many peasant farmers could lose their access to common land, and be forced to become labourers or move to towns in the hope of finding work.

Activity 6 Family life

This should take around 20–30 minutes

Here are some short extracts from primary source documents that reveal something of early modern family life.

Part A: Ralph Josselin's diary

Ralph Josselin (1617–1683) was the vicar at Earl's Colne in Essex. His diaries record the everyday details of his life, including the births of his children. Josselin wrote in a style which is typical of the seventeenth century. You may find the grammar a bit odd and some words are spelt in an unfamiliar form. Josselin also uses some abbreviations to save time – not unlike modern texting! Reading historical texts is a skill so do try to work out what is being said. Often saying aloud exactly what you see can help. Where the meaning is hard to grasp we've provided the modern wording.

Read the following extract from *The Diary of the Rev. Ralph Josselin 1616–1683*, then answer the following questions:

- How would you sum up Josselin's account of the births of his children?
- What does he describe?
- What is his attitude to the arrival of children?

[[p. 12]] [1642] My wife now growing bigge & ill, my mother [in law] came from Olney to us upon a Tuesday [...] April : 12 : after sermon, having waited upon God in his house, my wife called her women and God was mercifull to mee in my house, giving her a safe deliverance, & a daughter which on Thursday April : 14 was baptized by the name of Mary, M^r Rich : Harlakenden, M^r John Litle, M^{rs} Mary Mildmay & my wives mother being witnesses. I entertayned my neighbors all about; it cost me 6*l.* & 13*s.* 4*d.* at least : they showed much love to mee from all parts : God blessed my wife to bee a nurse [Was able to breastfeed the baby], and our child thrived, and

was even then a pleasant comfort to us : God wash it from its corruption & sanctify it and make it his owne [...]

[[p. 65]] [May 5 1649] My deare wife had beene very ill for 3 weekes, now towards night paynes [pains] came fast on her and shee was delivered before nine of the clocke of her 5^t [fifth] child, and third sonne, God giving us another sonne in stead of my deare Ralph whom he tooke away ; my wife was alone a great while with our good freinds M^{rs} Mary, and her mother ; some few women were with her, but the midwife not, but when God commands deliverance y^r [there] is nothing hinders it.

[[p. 144]] [Nov 26 1664] On Thursday morning about seven of the clocke or before, my deare wife after many sad pains, and sadder feares, in respect of the unkindlines of her labo^r, was yett through Gods mercy, delivered of her 10th child, sixt daughter, and o^r [our] now seventh child and 5^t daughter living, for wth [which] mercy my soule blesseth him.

(Hockliffe (ed.), 1908, pp. 12, 65, 144)

Discussion

Josselin tells us very little about the births, or the infants – but he does describe something about his wife's labours. (This is probably because men were not expected to be present at the birth itself: this was an event attended by women.) He clearly welcomes the children, and writes fondly of a dead child ('deare Ralph'). Josselin spends a lot of space expressing his thanks to God for the safe delivery of children, and clearly sees that God rather than human agency ultimately determines whether children live or die.

Part B: Richard Gough, the history of Myddle

Richard Gough (1635–1723) wrote *The History of Myddle* between 1700 and 1706. It is a biographical portrait of a village, based on Gough's own memories and reflecting his opinions. Most of the material describes life in the late seventeenth century.

Read the following extract from Gough's 'The account of the Watkins family'. Then answer the following questions:

- What does this document suggest about the importance of marriage, and attitudes to marriage, in the seventeenth century?
- What does it suggest about businesses?

Mr. Francis Watkins was married after the wars in England. He was heir to his father's lands, and also to his art of good husbandry, in which his care, diligence, and skill, was not exceeded by any in this county. He marled [fertilised] several pieces, and got abundance of corn. He purchased lands in Tylley Park, and certainly, if he had lived, he had been an exceeding rich man. His wife was provident and sparing, even to a fault; and, therefore, he could not keep so good a house as his father did, which was no small trouble to him. He died and left five small children behind him; viz three sons and two daughters. His widow afterwards married with Mr. Charles Dimock, a younger brother of that ancient family, of the Dimocks of Willeton. He had no knowledge in husbandry, and his whole delight was in drinking; not as some drunkards plead, for company's sake, but for the sake of drink. He lived but few years with her before he died. She had no child by him, and

she got nothing, but rather lost by this marriage. She married a third husband, his name was John Cotton, an ancient bachelor. He was son and heir of Richard Cotton, of Haston. She got well by this marriage, which was helpful to her children. She had no child by him, and he died before her. She was much to be commended for giving her children good education, and put every one of them in a good condition to live. Mary, the youngest daughter, was married to Mr. Roe, of Preece. He was a fair and good-humoured man. He died and left her a widow, and now she is married again, but I know not what his name is. Elizabeth, the eldest, was married to John Joyce, who lives at the lodge in Kenwicke Park. John, the youngest son, was set apprentice to a grocer or merchant in Bristol, and was set up but broke; and, [[p. 53]] after receiving a small supply from his mother, he set up at Wolverhampton, and there married, and after grew melancholy and died. Francis the second son, was a grocer in Shrewsbury, and was set up in a good condition. He married a daughter of Mr. Collins Woolrich, an apothecary, and one of the senior aldermen of Shrewsbury, and had a good fortune with her; but he (trusting out goods too rashly) broke. William, the eldest son, was put a covenanted servant unto Mr. John Edwards, one of the ablest attorneys at law in this county. At expiration of his term, he married Elizabeth, eldest daughter of Mr. John Edwards.

This Mr. William Watkins is now (1701) owner of this farm, and very happy in that it hath pleased God to give him such skill, care, and industry in good husbandry as his grandfather and father had, for he is not inferior to either of them therein. He is also happy in a prudent, provident and discreet wife who is every way suitable for such a husband. They live very lovingly together, very loving to their neighbours, and very well beloved by their neighbours, and they are both happy in that it hath pleased God in token of his love to them, and their mutual love one to another to bless them with many comely and witty children.

(Gough, 1979, pp. 52)

Discussion

Gough clearly thinks that marriage is important: he records all the marriages in the family (even Mary's second marriage, although he knows nothing about her husband). All of the family marry at least once; Francis Watkins' widow marries three times. This is not unusual for the period.

While farming can be a prosperous enterprise, Gough suggests that setting up in business can be a risky one: two of Francis' sons fail in business.

6.2 Religion: Reformation and Counter-Reformation

Religion was one of the most important features of life in early modern Europe. The Christian faith was predominant, although there were also Jews and Muslims living in Europe. In 1500 the Catholic Church held enormous power and influence. Across most of the continent, the Pope and a hierarchy of archbishops, cardinals and bishops organised and supervised the work of local priests, who looked after the souls of the people living in a particular area or **parish**. Religious rituals marked the key events of life: the baptism of

newborn children, marriage, and the last rites before death. People prayed to saints for help in times of trouble. The year was divided by religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter, and even dates in the farming calendar – when to plough, or sow, or harvest – often corresponded with days associated with particular saints.

However, the church was increasingly coming under attack from reformers, led by Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564). They argued against Catholic **theology** – the understanding of God and his relationship to the world. They also criticised church practices such as selling indulgences (promises that the purchaser would be let off some of the penalties of **purgatory**), arguing that there was no justification in the Bible for such actions. These debates struck at the most fundamental understanding of God, of the role of the church and of how people should live their lives.

The division between Protestant and Catholic theology

The main points of difference between Luther and the Catholic Church were:

The source of truth about religion – Catholics had long accepted that the Pope and councils of the church were sources of religious truth. For Luther and other reformers, only the Bible, the word of God, was an authoritative statement of religious truth (the doctrine of *sola scriptura*).

The role of the Church – For Catholics, the Church was an essential mediator between God and man: celibate priests were special intermediaries between God and ordinary people. For Luther, everyone was able to communicate with God. Clergy could help their congregations to live a godly life, but lived as ordinary people and were encouraged to marry and have children.

The sacraments – Sacraments are actions or ceremonies which mark particular points in individuals' lives. The Catholic Church recognised seven: baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, marriage, the priesthood and extreme unction (the last rites). Luther narrowed these down to just two: baptism and communion. Communion, when Christians communed (became one) with Christ, was also redefined. Catholics believed that priests literally turned the bread and wine used in the ritual into the body and blood of Christ, but reformers held a variety of opinions on whether the act involved an actual transformation or if it was symbolic.

Salvation – The question of how individuals could ensure that they spent the afterlife in heaven rather than hell was one of profound importance to early modern people. The Catholic Church taught that punishment in purgatory or hell awaited those who misbehaved or sinned while on earth, but that people could gain access to heaven through performing good works and following the Ten Commandments while alive. Luther rejected this, arguing that humans are innately sinful. Only God could grant humans access to the afterlife, which he did to those who believed: people were redeemed by faith alone (the doctrine referred to as *sola fide*).

Something of the contrast between Catholic and Protestant worship can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. The rich, beautiful image of the Virgin Mary and saints around the altarpiece was designed to encourage prayer (Figure 4), whereas the plain interior of the Calvinist Church offered little to distract the attention of worshippers from the sermon (Figure 5).



Figure 4 Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Our Lady of Rosary*, 1617, altarpiece; Giovan Battista Magistris, *Adoration of Magi*, 1675, altar antependium; Giovanni Cristoforo Storer, *Stories of Mary and Jesus*, 1646, frescoes. Certosa di Pavia monastery, Lombardy, Italy. Photo: Getty.



Figure 5 Isaak Nickelen, *Interior of St Bavo in Haarlem*, seventeenth century, oil on oak wood, 38 x 43 cm. Schlossmuseum, Schloss Friedenstein, Gotha, Germany. Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg/Bridgeman Images.

The Reformation

By the middle of the sixteenth century, the split between the Catholic Church and reformers had grown too wide for reconciliation. The reformers – who were united in attacking the Catholic Church, but disagreed on significant points of theology – inspired the establishment of many reformed or Protestant churches (the term was derived from a letter of protest written in 1529 in support of Luther's teachings), including the Lutheran, Calvinist and Methodist churches. While the population of southern Europe remained predominantly Catholic, Protestant churches flourished in the north. The religious division, or **Reformation**, sparked conflicts, with hundreds of thousands dying for their faith in religious wars.

Luther and his fellow reformers had not set out to create a new church, but had sought to reform the Catholic Church. The popularity of Protestant ideas forced the Catholic Church to embark on a series of reforms, often called the **Counter-Reformation**, which addressed many of the criticisms launched by Luther. At the Council of Trent, a series of

meetings held between 1545 and 1563, members of the Catholic hierarchy reaffirmed the fundamental points of their faith, ordered that priests should be better trained and thus better able to care for their congregations, standardised the mass (the form of church service – the text remained in use until the 1960s) and brought an end to corrupt practices such as selling indulgences.

Activity 7 Two wills from Kibworth, Leicestershire

This should take around 20–30 minutes

Wills, like inventories, are basically lists, but they are valuable sources for understanding how people valued certain goods (which might or might not have had a significant monetary value), and how they chose to distribute them to their family and the wider community. They also give us an insight into religious faith and how it changed over time.

Part A: The Will of Katherine Polle

Read the 'Will of Katherine Polle', below. Katherine was a Catholic and her will reflects her faith. Then answer the following question:

- Who are the main beneficiaries?

(Note: 'Sir William Polle' was not a nobleman: 'sir' was a title commonly used to refer to a priest or curate. A 'trental' was money left to a priest to pray for the souls of the dead for 30 days.)

[[p. 280]] In the name of God Amen the eighth day of the month of April 1516 I Katherine Poll of Kibworth Harcourt sound of mind and memory make my Testament in this manner. Firstly I leave my soul to almighty God and the Blessed Mary, and my body to be buried in the churchyard of St Wilfrid's in the parish of Kibworth. Item I leave to the Mother Church of Lincoln 4d. Item I leave for the repair of the parish church of Kibworth aforesaid 20s. Item I leave for the repair of the Chapel of St Leonard of Smeeton 3s 4d. Item I leave to Margaret my daughter 53s 4d. Item I leave to Sir William Polle my son to celebrate one trental for prayers for the health of my soul and all the faithful departed 10s. [[p. 281]] Item I leave to each of the priests who celebrate my exequies [funeral rites] 6d. Whatever truly remains of my goods I leave my executors Sir William Polle and Thomas Clerke of Kibworth Beauchamp to dispose of as they think fit for the good of my soul and to be supervisor of my testament Sir Walter Lucas Rector of the church of Kibworth.

(Wood, 2010, pp. 280–1)

Discussion

Katherine leaves money to churches – her local churches at Kibworth and Smeeton and a larger church at Lincoln. She also leaves money to priests to conduct her funeral and say prayers. By far the largest sum is bequeathed to her family: her daughter is to receive a much larger sum than the other people and places mentioned. She also leaves something to be distributed by her executors, possibly to the poor of the parish. The will shows Katherine's concern with the welfare of her soul. She formally leaves her soul to God, and she ensures that prayers will be said and that other good deeds

will be performed on her behalf by her executors, which will help her soul to pass through purgatory to heaven.

Part B: The Will of Thomas Ray, farmer, 1559

Thomas Ray died in the reign of Elizabeth I, when the Protestant faith was the official religion.

Read the 'Will of Thomas Ray'. Compare this with the will of Katherine Polle, which you read in Part A, and answer the following questions:

- Does Ray's will suggest a different attitude to the welfare of his soul?
- What would you say was Ray's main concern when drawing up his will?

In Nomine Dei the year of our lord God 1559 the 18th of October, I Thomas Rey of Kibworth Harcourt In the County of Leicester, gentleman, sick in body but thanks be to God in perfect mind & memory, make & ordain that my last will & testament in manner following. First I bequeath my soul to almighty God & and my body to be buried within the church of the said Kibworth. Item I bequeath to the mother church of Lincoln 4d. Item to the poor of the parish ten shillings. Item I bequeath to Michael Coxon two kine [pigs] and eleven hoggerylles [piglets] one featherbed & all things belonging unto it with part of my apparel at the discretion of my wife, my debts and funeral expenses discharged. The residue of my goods unbequeathed I give to Margaret my wife and Nicholas my son whom I make my full executors of all my goods moveable & unmoveable to be distributed betwixt them too by equal portions; also I will that Nicholas my said heir the lease of my farm when he cometh to lawful age with all his goods & if it fortune my wife to marry away from the farm then I will that Michael Coxon have the occupation of that said farm till my son cometh to lawful age & if it fortune that God call my son to his mercy before he come to lawful age Then I Will that his goods be divided equally betwixt my wife & Michael Coxon aforesaid. Also I do make Nicholas Cloudsley supervisor that this my last will and testament be performed. And for his pains I give him an old ahsell [a donkey?] for a token

(Wood, 2010, p. 291)

Discussion

The two wills begin in a similar way: Ray gives his soul to God, and leaves money to a church. He also gives a set sum to the poor living in the parish. However, there is nothing about the welfare of his soul – no money to priests or for prayers. This reflects the different understandings in Catholic and Protestant faiths of how souls could reach heaven.

Most of Ray's will is concerned with distributing his worldly goods to family and friends. He is very concerned that his farm should pass to his son and he makes special arrangements to ensure that it will stay in the family if his wife marries again.

6.3 Work and trade

Both the social order and religious beliefs went through fundamental change in the early modern period, but when we turn to work and trade, historians have described elements of both continuity and change. On the one hand, there were no major technological developments or wholesale changes in methods of production. Many eighteenth-century workers followed the same occupations and used the same techniques as their late medieval counterparts. On the other hand, the European economy grew considerably: to put it simply, more things were made, traded, bought and sold in 1780 than in 1500, largely as a result of a growth in population. This does not mean that everyone became wealthier, however. During periods of rapid population growth in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the increasing number of people produced a greater demand for food, clothing and so forth, and prices rose. But there were also more people looking for work, and, at the same time, wages declined. This left many of the poor struggling for survival, but created opportunities for new business enterprises too. Historians have also described a change in attitudes to work – an ‘industrious revolution’ – with people willing to work longer hours and more intensely in order to buy more goods.

Early modern agriculture

How did these broad changes affect production? In early modern Europe, as in medieval times, the economy was dominated by agriculture. Between 80 and 90 per cent of the population lived in rural areas, and most (though not all) worked on the land. Men, women and children all laboured to produce foodstuffs (mainly grain, but also fruits and vegetables), fuel in the form of timber, and raw materials such as wool, flax (the fibre used to make linen) and leather. Although agriculture was the main form of work across Europe, rural life was not the same for everyone. Different types of agriculture were practised in different areas, and many people worked in rural industries rather than on the land. Rural life was difficult – factors such as the weather could determine whether people lived well or starved.

While techniques of agricultural work did not change much in the early modern period, there were developments in farming. Farmers successfully responded to the increasing demand for food by introducing new agricultural practices (such as mixing pasturing and raising crops), by bringing more land into cultivation and by seeking out the cheapest sources of labour. Interestingly, farmers continued to innovate when population growth slowed and demand declined, by moving into more specialist forms of agriculture and by farming larger fields, which allowed more efficient use of labour. Clearly, farming was changing over time, through many small improvements in farming practices rather than any one fundamental innovation.

Early modern manufacturing

Processes of growth, specialisation and diversification also occurred in manufacturing – although change was slow and, for many people, work changed little over generations. The dominant feature of manufacturing in the early modern period was the small scale of production. Many of the goods used every day were made within households. Food was processed: grain was made into bread and beer, and milk into butter, while fish and meat were preserved for later use, either by the family or for sale. Simple items such as

brooms, platters and baskets were made at home. Textile production had traditionally been carried out in the home, but in the early modern period, while women continued to process fibre into yarn at home (Figure 6), the more skilled aspects of clothing production – weaving cloth and making up cloth into garments – were passed to specialist weavers and tailors.

Textiles were an important part of the early modern economy, with demand for clothing growing steadily as more people expected to have clothes reflecting the latest fashions. Cloth was traded over large distances. Silk fabrics from Italy and woollen cloths made in England and the Netherlands were exported across Europe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, household textile production was coordinated into larger-scale manufacture through the 'putting-out system' or **proto-industrialisation**. This system exploited the slack periods in the farming year, when workers had spare time that they could use in making cloth. Merchants bought raw wool or flax and sent out parcels of the material to a succession of workers who would in turn prepare the fibre, spin it, weave it into cloth and then dye the cloth. Merchants paid each worker for their contribution, according to the amount of yarn spun or cloth woven, and sold the finished cloth to recover their costs and make a profit. In some areas, proto-industries began to take over from agriculture, with families abandoning farming work and devoting all their time to manufacturing.



Figure 6 Pieter Nijs, *Woman Spinning*, 1652, oil on canvas, 59 x 61 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. Photo: © Dulwich Picture Gallery/Bridgeman Images. Paintings of peasant women often showed them spinning at home, combining the work with other tasks such as looking after children, or simply chatting to neighbours and friends.

The manufacture of luxury goods, such as furniture, jewellery, elaborate ceramics and mirrors, required higher levels of skill. These goods were produced in towns, in the workshops of specialist craftsmen. The production of these goods was closely regulated by **guilds**, associations of workers engaged in the same trade, such as goldsmiths or furriers, who banded together to protect their collective interests. Guilds oversaw the training of **apprentices**, and regulated the number of new businesses that were set up in any location and the quality of goods offered for sale.

Activity 8 A servant's indenture

This should take around 20 minutes

Read Monica Chojnacka and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, 'Young woman places herself into service, France 1542'. Then answer the following questions:

- What will be Catherine's main work in her new position?
- Where will she live while she works for her employer?

Large numbers of young people in early modern Europe were employed as servants in urban or rural households. A young person might place himself or herself into a household as a servant or apprentice, especially if her or his parents were dead or lived elsewhere. Although it was certainly more common for young men to place themselves, in the following document a young woman affirms her right to make such arrangements for herself. She signs up for two years of live-in employment as a servant and assistant to a merchant.

(Paris, Archives Nationales, Minutier central, Étude VIII/474, October 11, 1542. Translated by Carol Loats.)

Catherine Denis, daughter of the late Jehan Denis, who while living was a carpenter, living in Troussurt near Beauvais, the said Catherine aged more than 18 years, as she says, affirms that for her own benefit she places herself in service and employment.

[She places herself] from today for the next two years with and in the service of Nicollas Querin, merchant mercier [seller of fashion merchandise such as trims and accessories], living in Paris, rue St. Denis, near the culvert. [Querin], present here, has retained the said Catherine as his servant during the said time.

And the said Catherine, in making [this arrangement], has promised and promises to serve the said Nicollas Guerin well and loyally in his said occupation of mercerie, to sell and retail his merchandise, and she has promised and promises and guarantees to give a good account and balance of that which will be given to her by her said master to sell and retail, and of the profit which comes from it; and so promises to serve him in all his lawful and honorable business, work to his benefit, avoid losses to him; without serving elsewhere during the said time. For this service the said Nicollas Guerin has promised, will be obliged, and promises and guarantees to supply to the said Catherine what she needs in terms of drink, food, fire, bed, lodging, light, along with the sum of 10 livres tournois for the said time of two years, and which he has promised to pay to the said Catherine to the extent that she earns it, to the said value of 10 livres tournois for the said two years.

Because thus, etc., promising, etc., obligating, etc., each renouncing to the other, etc., Done the year 1542, Wednesday, the 11th day of October.

(Chojnacka and Wiesner-Hanks (eds), 2002, p. 171)

Discussion

- Although she is described as a 'servant', Catherine is not required to carry out household tasks. Instead she will be engaged in selling goods. As the agreement says that she will be given goods to sell, it appears that she will not work alongside her employer, but perhaps in a marketplace.
- However, it does appear that Catherine will live in her employer's household, as she will be given clothing and lodging as well as wages.

6.4 Bodies, health and disease

Life was precarious in early modern Europe and often all too short. Between one-tenth and as many as a half of all children died before their tenth birthday. **Epidemic diseases** could devastate communities. A single plague outbreak in seventeenth-century Amsterdam killed up to one-sixth of the population; the same disease killed over four-fifths of the people of Santander in Spain (Kamen, 2000, p. 25). For much of the population, any illness that prevented them from working for even a short time meant a slide into poverty, while injuries such as broken limbs could result in permanent disability.

In early modern Europe, many people understood how their bodies functioned by using theories devised in ancient Greece and Rome by scholars such as Hippocrates (c.460 BCE–375 BCE) and Galen (129–199 CE). The important components of the body were thought to be four fluids, or **humours**: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. When these fluids were balanced, the body was healthy. When there was some form of imbalance – an excess of one or more fluid, or a blockage in their flow around the body – illness occurred. This could be caused by an inappropriate diet, environment or lifestyle. Although this idea seems very strange to us, it was based on observation: when ill the body often ejects fluids such as vomit or phlegm. Under the humoral system, this was interpreted as the body trying to heal itself by getting rid of bad or excess fluids.

Sickness in early modern London

What kinds of illnesses did people suffer in the early modern period?

Activity 9 A bill of mortality

This should take around 10–15 minutes

Look at this bill of **mortality** (a record of deaths) from London for one week in 1665 (Figure 7). What diseases do you recognise?

The Diseases and Casualties this Week.

A Bortive	3
Aged	19
Bleeding	1
Cancer	1
Childbed	7
Chrisomes	14
Consumption	83
Convulsion	31
Droptic	22
Drowned 3, two at St. Katharines Tower, and one at St. Magdalen Bermonsey	3
Executed	3
Fever	48
Fistula	1
Flox and Small-pox	23
Flux	1
Found dead in the street at St. Peters in Cheapside	1

French-pox	1
Griping in the Guts	34
Jaundies	1
Imposthume	3
Infants	11
Kild at St. Martins in the fields	1
Kingsevil	1
Livergrown	1
Palie	1
Plague	267
Rickets	9
Rising of the Lights	4
Scurvy	1
Shot with a Pistol at Savoyers Southwark	1
Spotted Feaver	12
Stillborn	11
Stopping of the Stomach	3
Strangury	1
Surfeit	14
Teeth	32
Thrush	3
Timpany	1
Tiffick	2
Vomiting	1
Winde	3
Wormes	4

Christned	Males	107
	Females	92
	In all	199

Buried	Males	331
	Females	353
	In all	684

Plague 267

Increased in the Burials this Week 69

Parishes clear of the Plague 110 Parishes Infected 20

The Assize of Bread set forth by Order of the Lord Maior and Counc of Aldermen,
A penny Wheaten Loaf to contain Nine Ounces and a half, and three
half-penny White Loaves the like weight.

Figure 7 A page showing a weekly mortality bill, from London's Dreadful Visitation, or, A Collection of All the Bills of Mortality for the Present Year Beginning the 27th of December 1664, and Ending the 19th of December 1665. Published by Edwin Cotes, London, 1665. Photo: Wellcome Library, London.

Discussion

There are a few names here that you might recognise, including cancer, fever (spelled 'feaver'), smallpox, plague and scurvy. Some of the diseases listed, such as

convulsions, 'griping in the guts' (stomach pains or cramps) or 'teeth', seem to be unlikely causes of death. Bills of mortality are a reminder of how difficult it can be to understand what went on in the past.

Of course, people also suffered from less serious complaints, such as coughs, colds and stomach upsets, and children caught infectious diseases such as measles.

To cure disease and restore the balance of humours, people adjusted their lifestyles, ensuring that they got enough sleep and exercise and avoided eating too much of one type of food. Medicines provided a more immediate means of adjusting the humoral balance by causing some form of evacuation from the body, and people readily swallowed purges (which caused diarrhoea) and emetics (which induced vomiting). Bloodletting was a popular cure, used for many ailments. Faced with epidemics, when many people fell ill at the same time, communities applied collective remedies, isolating infected people away from the healthy, using bonfires to purify the air and saying prayers to invoke divine help (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Thomas Dekker, title page of plague pamphlet, London 'A Rod for Run-aways', 1625. Published by H. W. Haggard, Harper, New York, 1929. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. This woodcut captures the horror of plague. It shows people in London dying in large numbers: coffins are scattered about. The figures on the right of the image are trying to leave the city but are pursued by Death (the skeleton figure) and are forced back by those living in the surrounding healthy areas.

Medical treatment

Patients employed a wide range of practitioners to help them manage their health. At one end of the scale were **physicians**, trained in medicine at universities, who diagnosed illness by carefully observing symptoms and prescribed appropriate treatments. They charged high fees and were used by wealthy patients. A wider range of people employed **surgeons**, who dealt with injuries and other problems with the exterior of the body, and **apothecaries**, who prepared and sold medicines. Both surgeons and apothecaries lacked the thorough knowledge of the body possessed by physicians: they were not supposed to diagnose or prescribe, but in practice many did. At the other end of the scale was a variety of practitioners who lacked formal training: quacks or charlatans who sold remedies and carried out simple operations like removing teeth; **midwives** who helped deliver babies; and neighbours, friends and relations who might give out advice or medicines.

6.5 Knowledge and ideas

Two of the key events which defined the beginning of the early modern period were linked to ideas. The first was technological: the development of printing using type. Figure 9 shows an early printing press.



Figure 9 A mechanical printing press of the type designed by Johannes Gutenberg, c.1568, woodcut. Photo: Pictures from History/Bridgeman Images. The image shows the process of printing. In the background, two printers put type into frames to form the words. The man with two pads is putting ink on to the type. A fourth figure takes the printed page out of the press.

Ideas had been circulating in manuscript for centuries, but the printing press provided an additional means of reproducing texts in very large numbers. Books were produced in both cheap and expensive editions. The production of cheap editions, coupled with the increasing numbers of people who were able to read, meant that people from across society were reading – the rich, the middling and even some working people had access to books and ideas.

Printing affected all areas of life. For example, the availability of cheap books would have had a big impact on religion, especially the Protestant religion, which emphasised reading the Bible. In terms of social life, print opened up reading as a form of leisure to many more people. In the world of work, being able to read and write would have helped communications and record keeping.

New ideas

The other key event defining the beginning of the early modern period was a cultural movement associated with new ways of thinking: the Renaissance. This refers to the re-examination or rediscovery of texts from classical Greece and Rome which began in Italy. (Confusingly, the English term 'renaissance' comes from the French word for 'rebirth'; sometimes you may find historians using the Italian word 'rinascimento' instead.) The term was coined by nineteenth-century historians, but scholars working in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did see themselves as making a break with the past. Petrarch (1304–1374), an Italian scholar and poet, was one of the first to think of his time as distinctively different from previous ages and to divide history into periods: the ancient world, the Middle Ages and his own, modern period. Renaissance scholars claimed to be rediscovering the knowledge of the ancient world, although in fact medieval scholars had worked on ancient texts. But Renaissance scholars were interested in different aspects of ancient scholarship, particularly rhetoric (the art of creating a persuasive argument) and languages. They produced new translations of and commentaries on Greek, Hebrew and Latin texts, developed new forms of education and new techniques in art, and placed a new emphasis on the use of observation as a basis for knowledge. Moreover, the retrieval and study of theological texts written by early scholars such as St Augustine (354–430 CE) helped to drive church reform. These ideas spread across Europe in the fifteenth century.

The Renaissance emphasis on observation and reason as the means of developing better understandings of the world underpinned further periods of new intellectual enquiry: the **Scientific Revolution** and the **Enlightenment**. From the sixteenth century onwards, scholars brought the new emphasis on observation to the study of mathematics, physics, astronomy and anatomy. For example, Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), professor of anatomy at Padua University, published *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* ('On the fabric of the human body') in 1543 (Figure 10). Where medieval anatomy texts drew the human body in ways that fitted with **humoral theory**, Vesalius based his illustrations on observations made during the dissection of bodies. However, while Vesalius pointed out errors in older texts, he retained his belief in classical theories of how the body worked. Similarly, Copernicus revealed that ancient explanations of the movement of the planets, based on the idea that the earth was at the centre of the heavens, conflicted with actual observation. His book *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* ('On the revolutions of the heavenly spheres'), published in 1543, revolutionised astronomy by placing the sun at the centre of the solar system, but retained the circular orbits used by earlier scholars.

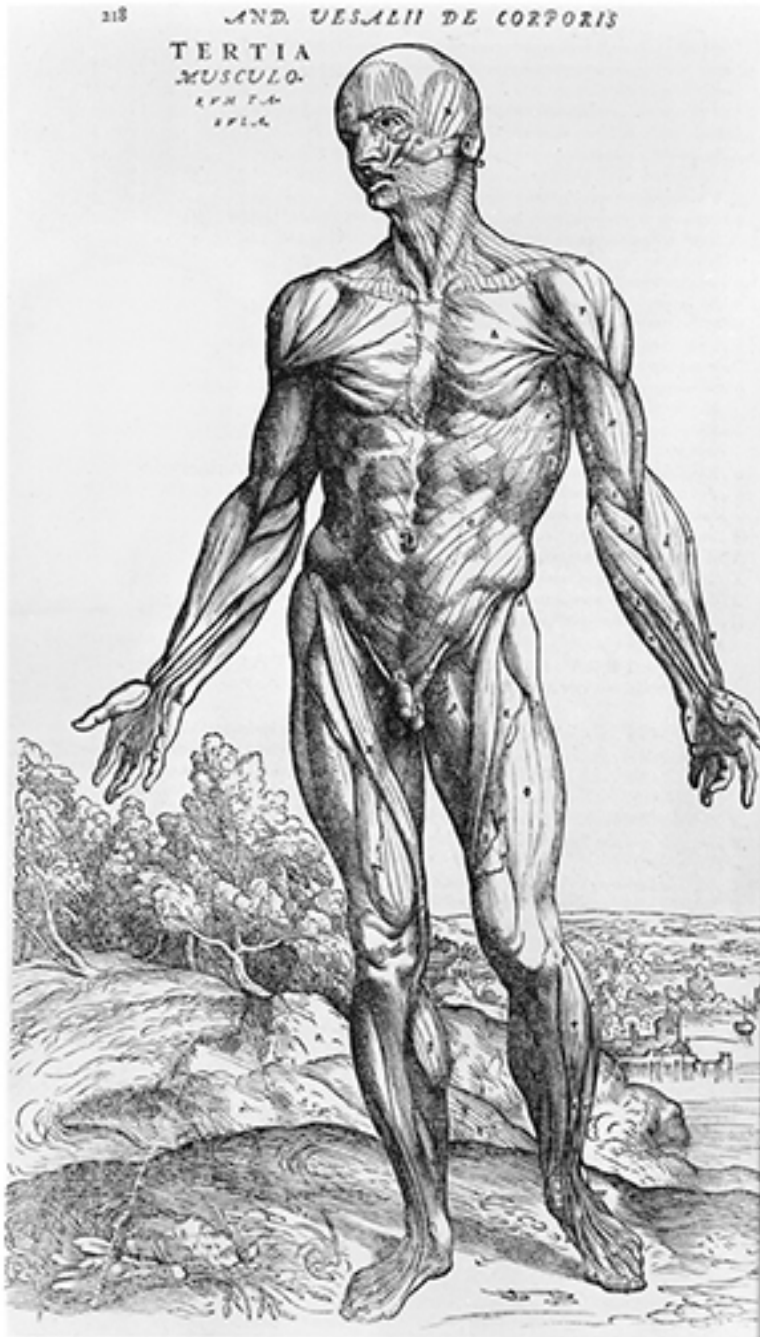


Figure 10 Anatomical study, illustration by Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, 1543, engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Paris, France/ Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Images.

In the Enlightenment, beginning in the late seventeenth century, scholars expanded their field of study to cover biology, chemistry and the 'science of man', exploring how the mind worked and how people interacted in different societies. The overall goal of Enlightenment thinkers was the improvement of human life. Old sources of authority, including the church and the monarchy, were subjected to severe criticism and scholars attempted to create greater political freedoms through a new relationship between 'enlightened' rulers and the people.

Conclusion

As the term suggests, the early modern period has been seen as a bridge between the medieval and modern worlds. I hope that through studying this free course, *Early modern Europe: an introduction*, you have realised that it is a period with its own special character. One of the most striking features of early modern life is the way in which radical changes, such as the development of new religious ideas, sit alongside fundamental continuities, as in many aspects of the world of work. Identifying the drivers for change, and the factors behind continuity still presents a challenge for historians.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A223 Early modern Europe: society and culture, 1500 to 1780](#).

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Glossary

Apothecaries

People who prepared and sold medicines and drugs.

Catholic Church

The Christian Church, led by the Pope, or bishop of Rome, and with its headquarters in the Vatican.

Counter-reformation

A reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church that arose in sixteenth-century Europe in response to the Protestant Reformation.

Enlightenment

A European intellectual movement of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries emphasising reason and individualism rather than traditional sources of authority.

Epidemic diseases

Outbreaks of disease affecting many people simultaneously.

Feudal system

A system of relationships based around the right to use land in return for labour or for services.

French Revolution

An uprising against the monarchy and ruling classes from 1789 to 1799 which resulted in the establishment of France as a republic.

Humours/humoural theory

Fluids found within the body (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) which determined if a person remained healthy or became ill.

Industrial Revolution

The rapid development of industry from the late eighteenth century, through the introduction of machinery. It was characterised by the use of steam power, the growth of factories, and the mass production of manufactured goods.

Journeyman

A worker who had completed an apprenticeship. They were employed by masters, and had not yet set up their own workshops.

Latin

The language of the Roman Empire, it continued to be used by educated people throughout the medieval period and much of the early modern period in Europe.

Midwives

Women who helped to deliver babies and supported mothers in the days following birth.

Parish

A small administrative district of the Christian Church, usually with its own church and a priest or clergyman.

Patriarchal

Relating to a group or society where men have authority. This is often reflected in laws and customs.

Physicians

Medical practitioners trained in medical theories (usually in universities) with skills and knowledge in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

Protestant Church

The Christian Church that separated from the Roman Catholic Church at the Reformation. The term derives from a letter written by a number of German princes in 1529 protesting against a decree that condemned the teachings of Martin Luther.

Proto-industrialisation

The large scale production of goods prior to the development of factory production in the Industrial Revolution, carried out in homes and workshops in rural areas.

Purgatory

A place to which Roman Catholics believe that the spirits of dead people go and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were alive, before they are able to go to heaven.

Reformation

A sixteenth-century movement aimed at the reform of abuses within the Roman Catholic Church which ended in the establishment of the Protestant Church. The Reformation is usually thought of as beginning in 1517, when Martin Luther issued 95 theses criticising Church doctrine and practice.

Renaissance

A cultural movement, beginning in Italy, which saw a revival of interest in texts from classical Greece and Rome, resulting in a flowering of the arts and literature.

Scientific revolution

A series of developments in mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology, anatomy and chemistry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which transformed views of society and nature.

Surgeons

Medical practitioners specialising in the treatment of wounds and conditions affecting the surface of the body.

Theology

The study of the nature of God and religious belief.

Urbanisation

The process by which an increasing proportion of the population move into towns and cities from rural areas.

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Further reading

If you found this course interesting, you can pursue your interest in various ways.

There are lots of websites that have material about the early modern period. Large museums such as the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum have online galleries which include objects from the early modern period. Houses like Hampton Court Palace have websites with relevant information and images.

Or you could dip into some reading. Here are a few books that can extend your study of early modern Europe.

Cameron, E. (ed.) (1999) *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. A multi-authored textbook on early modern Europe.

Kamen, H. (2000) *Early Modern European Society*, London, Routledge. A very readable and wide-ranging account of the social history of early modern Europe.

Laslett, P. (1971) *The World We Have Lost*, London, Methuen. A classic account of early modern history, focusing on the differences between early modern society and that of the industrialised modern era.

Sarti, R. (2002) *Europe at Home: Family and Material Culture 1500–1800*, New Haven, CN and London, Yale University Press. An engaging account of households and family life, focusing on the material goods found in early modern homes.

Wiesner-Hanks, M. E. (2006) *Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A popular and comprehensive textbook on early modern Europe.

Acknowledgements

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