

LESSON 1: Rethinking Modern Assumptions about Property Value

One of the main barriers students face in medieval history is the importation of modern assumptions about property value as purely secular into the medieval past, in which property gifted to the church had both economic and moral value. Lesson 1 uses the familiar context of the modern world to help students understand where their modern perspective might differ from medieval perspectives on and beliefs around property transfers by getting comfortable with the format and purpose of a medieval charter. The learning goals center on close reading of charters, but use modern contexts to help students translate their understanding of gifts and property transfers from a modern perspective to a medieval one.

The first part of the lesson plan can be done as homework or in class. Ask students to write down:

- A possession they think of fondly that others might value (a home, a car, a cell phone, a prize toy)
 - What is it?
 - How much is it worth?
 - Are there any accessories or related items (a charging cable with a cell phone, or the toy driver of a toy car)?
- A nonprofit organization or charity that might benefit from using or selling that possession
 - Would you like your item to be sold for cash that goes to the organization, or used by the organization?
 - If you want them to use it, is it a permanent gift or a temporary one? Who gets the item when the organization is done with it?
- A list of people who might be present to witness the transfer of the possession

The second and third part of the lesson works best in groups of 3 or 4.

Have each student pass the list they generated at home to another person in the group. That person should use the information in their peer's document to write a modern charter based on the sample charter from Freising (no. 61, from 773 CE) at <http://www.charlemagneurope.ac.uk/charter-basics/>.

Then pass the newly written charter *without* the original item and nonprofit descriptions to a third person in the group. Ask them to make the necessary "factoid" entries using MCE's structure for your sample charter. Now talk about what's missing from each stage of the charter writing and how these things might get misinterpreted. For instance, did the factoids effectively describe the original grantor's purpose in gifting the item to a particular charity?

At this point, instructors can step in and talk about the idea that forgeries are sometimes necessary to handle some of these misinterpretations. The transition to medieval forgeries also lets instructors be explicit about two other things that are unusual in a modern context but not a medieval one: unfree persons, and leases or precaria, in which land might be offered for use by the church but the church would pay a smaller-than-normal rent (a full explanation of precarial grants is handily provided by the MCE on the same page as the sample charter).