The fall of Edward II: Failures in kingship and masculinity, the letter of Manuel Fieschi and the cult of resurrected celebrities

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Abstract

Edward II is a monarch whose name is almost synonymous with scandal and failure, and the infamous tale of his murder by red-hot poker at Berkeley Castle is one that looms over the bloody history of English royalty. The theories and historiography surrounding his political errors, his sexuality, the nature of his death and even the date of his death have changed continually since the end of his reign in 1327, both to further changing political agendas and to explore new historical narratives. In this paper, medieval gender norms and concepts of masculinity are used to scrutinise the failure of Edward's reign, and highlight their role in its doom.

In the late 19th century, a letter penned by Italian cleric Manuel Fieschi and addressed to Edward III further complicated Edward II's history. Fieschi claimed that the deposed king escaped his doom in 1327 and went on to tour Europe on a pilgrimage to famous shrines and holy places. This letter is analysed and its likelihood of truth assessed through relevant historiography by multiple historical experts on the topic. This analysis establishes that this adventurous tale of Edward's escape is almost certainly untrue.

However, the narrative does present us with an interesting example of a trope found throughout history of notable people, widely accepted as deceased, secretly living out their lives away from the public eye. The conspiratorial-style narrative of monarchs and famous people living on in secret has its repetitive nature demonstrated through a number of varied examples, both monastic and within popular culture.

This narrative is a common theme in the folklore of many cultures and the idea of resurrection is deeply rooted in religious ideologies. In this paper, this theme is explored through comparative research and analysis of individual cases. It is demonstrated that individuals are more or less likely to accept these deviated narratives depending on their general acceptance of conspiratorial ideas and establishment cover-ups. However, this trope is also examined in a different way, one of hopeful belief in a better outcome for those in the public eye.

Keywords: Regicide; conspiracies; royal imposters; medieval kingship; medieval masculinity; medieval gender; medieval homosexuality; Plantagenet dynasty; martyrdom; canonisation.

Introduction

The mysterious and supposedly brutal end to Edward II's reign and life has long stood as a murky and bloody chapter in the history of English royalty. Recent research and analysis has shown that medieval kingship and gender are inextricably linked, and that it was Edward's failure to meet expected gender norms that caused him to be an unsuccessful king, which, in turn, doomed his reign. But the Plantagenet king deposed and murdered in a cell at Berkeley Castle, allegedly by having a red-hot poker thrust up into his bowels, has split the opinion of historians on the subject of the circumstances of his death, if he even died at Berkeley at all. His death and its circumstances were further complicated after the discovery of an authentic contemporary letter, written by an Italian cleric and addressed to Edward III, claiming that the old king was, in fact, alive and well, living out his days as a hermit in Italy.

This story, while mostly dismissed by historians, follows a trope of secret survival by those widely accepted as deceased that is consistently found throughout history and up to the present day. These narratives of the royal and famous escaping death are perfectly situated in the space between the plausible and the impossible, where conspiracy theories flourish. Fieschi's tale of Edward II's escape from Berkeley Castle and his travels around Europe follows this classic conspiracy-theory-style story, and is a fascinating part of the narrative of the fall and death of Edward II. In this paper, three questions will be addressed: why did Edward II's reign end; did Edward survive his fate at Berkeley Castle; and for what purpose would his death even be questioned?

Causes of the deposition of Edward II

What were the causes of the downfall of Edward II? Phillips describes Edward II as someone who was easy to ignore and had 'too many weaknesses of character and behaviour to be a success'.[1] The Articles of Deposition, presented in 1327, deemed Edward an 'incompetent ruler' who was neglectful of the affairs of the kingdom and who was led by others, which had led to the 'destruction of the church and all his people'.[2] Historians have dubbed him unwilling, or pliant, even tyrannical, but there are theories that suggest that many of the problems that blighted Edward's rule were inherited from his father, Edward I, and that Edward may have been unfairly treated by historians. The main problems with Edward's reign can be broken down into three main areas: economics, war and favouritism.

Figure 1: Image depicting Edward II from an Illustration found in Cassell's Illustrated History of England, Volume 1, 1865. Edward II lost his throne and his life in 1327 after a reign fraught with power struggles and financial strain

By John Cassell (Internet Archive) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AP342-Edward_II.jpg

Edward began his reign burdened by his father's debts from financing Scottish wars. This lack of money caused many issues for the new king, who began financing his kingdom through multiple loans, such as those from Cardinal William Testa for two thousand marks, Enguerrand de Marigny for fifteen thousand pounds and Pope Clement V for twenty five thousand pounds.[3] This financial strain also had negative effects on the ongoing struggle with the Scots, meaning there were not enough financial resources to successfully defend the northern borders, which were being battered by Scottish raids.[4] Where his father, Edward I, had been successful in his Scottish campaigns and was nicknamed 'Hammer of the Scots', Edward II failed to prevent the Scottish advance far into Yorkshire, and suffered terrible defeats during his campaigns. Edward's reign, blighted by financial strain and catastrophic failures in Scotland, such as the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, was further burdened by the ongoing agrarian crisis of the 1310s. Together, this led to discontent among the English people and Edward's barons, who repeatedly tried to limit the king's power through ordinances and agreements.

The third and undoubtedly most famous factor in the downfall of Edward II was his extremely close relationship with Piers Gaveston, the nature of which sparks debate between historians to this day. Phillips quotes the chronicler Geoffrey Le Baker as saying 'upon

looking on him the son of the king immediately felt such love for him that he entered into a covenant of constancy, and bound himself with him before all other mortals with a bond of indissoluble love, firmly drawn up and fastened with a knot'.[5] Gaveston was from a family of faithful Gascon servants to Edward I, with Gaveston, his father and brother all serving in military campaigns for their king.[6] Baker goes on to describe him as 'graceful and agile in body, sharp witted, refined in manners, … [and] well versed in military matters', and it is said that his 'courteous manner' impressed Edward I, who knighted him in May 1306.[7] Gaveston enjoyed many privileges as Edward II's favourite. The king gifted him the Earldom of Cornwall, appointment to Keeper of the Realm, royal lieutenant of Ireland and royal chamberlain, and named him regent during the king's absence, to the dismay of higher-status English nobles.[8] Gaveston was even prominent at Edward's coronation, walking ahead of the new king holding the crown of Edward the Confessor, with his own coat of arms emblazoned on tapestries hung on the walls.[9]

Gaveston is often described as arrogant, and he was accused as seeing himself as a second king, with no equal except Edward himself.[10] He was criticised by contemporaries for his 'ostentatious dress and behaviour', and his power over the king infuriated the nobility of the period, with many agreeing there were, in fact, two kings, 'one in name and the other in deed'.[11] This arrogance and power were to doom Gaveston, who was executed for treason at the hands of earls of Warwick, Lancaster and Hereford in 1312. Although there is enough evidence to show the intimacy between the two men, there is no concrete proof of whether the two were lovers, or simply close friends, or brothers-in-arms. Chaplais argues that the privileges enjoyed by Gaveston were simply 'consistent with adoptive brotherhood'.[12]

Whatever the nature of their relationship, the perceived manipulation of the king by Gaveston greatly affected the opinion of the nobility towards Edward, which had already greatly deteriorated in the last years of his father's reign. Edward was seen to be taking bad advice from even worse advisers, to the detriment of his people and his kingdom.[13]

Edward's failure to meet expected medieval gender norms

With the growth in interest in the study of medieval gender roles, in particular the study of masculinity, a new layer can be added to the understanding of the failures of Edward II. Successful kings, argues Lewis, have an 'effective and profitable balance' of kingship and masculinity, as demonstrated by Edward III, who was praised for his 'temperate self-mastery'.[14] Gender norms played a vital role in the idea of kingship, with great kings displaying the best qualities of manliness and masculinity, the art of containing 'correct virtues and accomplishments within a courageous warrior's body'.[15] Lewis maintains that the deposition of Edward II was caused by his deviation from gender norms of late medieval England, having been criticised for his lack of warrior status by contemporaries and in later analysis.[16] Gaveston's influence over the king showed that Edward was not the master of himself; he was weak and so failed to meet the expectations of medieval gender norms. While there is no evidence to prove there was a sexual component to their relationship, Edward's favouritism towards Piers Gaveston left him open to accusations of homosexuality from chroniclers and historians after his deposition and death; this type of attack was commonplace at the time, with Pope Boniface III also facing charges of sodomy from his contemporaries.[17] In an era where sodomy was viewed as sinful and punishable, these allegations were serious and threatened the reputation of both a man and a king.

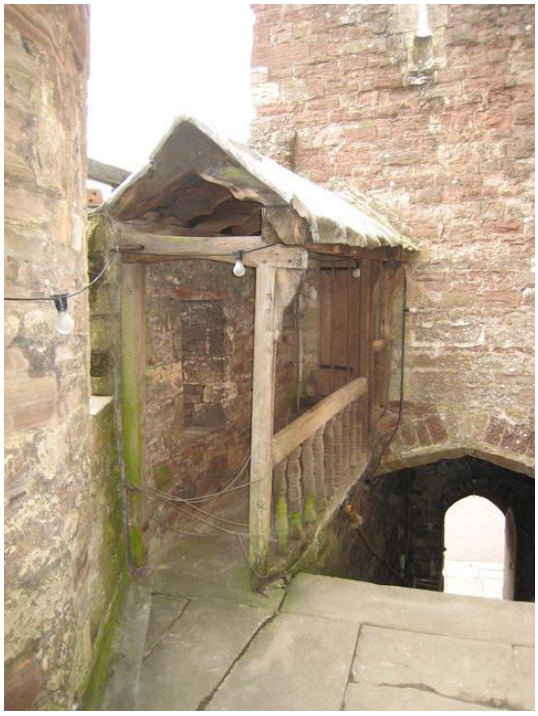
Whether or not these allegations were true, this element of homosexuality has stuck with Edward II. As recently as 1991, Derek Jarman's version of Marlowe's *Edward II* portrayed the downfall of the king as a direct result of his love affair with Gaveston.[18] Overall, this gendered element played a large part in Edward's downfall, with his failure to meet gender expectations dooming his ability to keep his nobles loyal and retain his power.

After his deposition, Edward is widely believed to have died at Berkeley Castle, many suggest at the hands of the newly established regime of his wife Isabella of France and her lover Roger Mortimer, as the old king's mere existence created hope for his reinstatement, which threatened their power.[19] But even Edward's death causes contention within the historiography of Edward II. This passage by Dr Ian Mortimer sets out the complicated nature of the recorded history surrounding the death of Edward II, with key changes due to changing contexts surrounding the story.

> The earliest chronicles state that Edward II died of a grief-induced illness. Those written after 1330 state that he was murdered, strangled or suffocated. Between 1332 and 1337 the chroniclers start to state that the murderers were Thomas Gurney and John Maltravers (even though John Maltravers had never been accused officially of the crime but was tried for a different one in 1330). Around 1340 chronicles start to repeat the story of a piece of metal being inserted through his anus; at first this is described as a copper rod, then an iron one, and finally an iron poker. The chronicles are inconsistent on whether it was hot or not (most that relate the story say that it was).[20]

Edward III would execute Roger Mortimer in 1330, after deposing his mother's lover and establishing himself as king. One of the many charges of which he was to be found guilty included the murder of Edward II, which directly correlates to the shift in the chroniclers' histories, demonstrating the changing nature of the interpretation and understanding of Edward's death depending on the political climate.[21]

Figure 2: Image of the passageway that supposedly leads to the cell in which Edward II was imprisoned at Berkeley Castle. It was in this cell that Edward spent his last days after losing his throne.



The letter of Manuel Fieschi

But did Edward really meet his end at Berkeley on 21 September 1327? Manuel Fieschi, a prominent papal notary and later the Bishop of Vercelli, was to write a letter that has forever complicated this narrative of Edward II's death.[22] Fieschi hailed from the influential Fieschi family, who were related to many of the ruling families in Europe, as well as having in their ranks two popes, many cardinals and hundreds of Catholic clerics.[23] This letter, addressed to Edward III, informed the young king of his father's survival from Berkeley Castle, and his current situation as a hermit in Italy. After fleeing Berkeley, Edward is said to have been received at Corfe Castle, and then spent nine months in hiding in Ireland.[24] Fearing discovery, Edward crossed England and sailed to the continent from the port of Sandwich, disguised in a habit, and then travelled through France to Avignon, where he was received for 15 days by Pope John XXII, who apparently confirmed his identity as Edward II.[25] He is then said to have travelled through Paris, Cologne and Milan before beginning a new life in seclusion in two hermitages in Lombardy.[26] Throughout his recollection of the king's movements, Fieschi highlights the religiosity of Edward's supposed travels. The king is said to don a habit as a disguise, to have visited the Pope in Avignon and made a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne.[27]

Fieschi's lost letter was discovered in the 1870s by Alexandre Germain, a notable French scholar, while he was examining totally unrelated administrative documents from the diocese of Maguelone in a 14th-century register.[28] He made his discovery public in a letter to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris on the 550th anniversary of Edward II's death on 21 September 1877.[29] The letter has been widely accepted as authentic, in so much as it is contemporary, with the date of its creation placed between 1329–1343, though Phillips estimates a more exact timescale of 1336–1338.[30] The letter's very exciting nature has left historians split on the truth behind Fieschi's story. Ian Mortimer, descendant of Roger Mortimer, endorses Fieschi's story, stating that 'the Genoese used the letter as means of forcing the English crown to pay outstanding debts'.[31] But Mortimer's position is coloured by his fixation on redeeming the memory of his ancestor, as, if Edward II had survived, it goes some way to clearing the name of the man charged and executed for treason and regicide. Tout completely dismisses the Fieschi letter, while Stubbs deems it improbable due to 'inconsistencies in matters of detail'.[32] Italian historians are more likely to advocate the authenticity of the Fieschi narrative, as it is a sense of local pride to have hosted an English king. Theories on the location of his tombs are even 'proved' by Nigra and Benedetti, with the latter even claiming that two candlesticks, housed at the Museum of Art at Turin, were, in fact, sent from Edward III to be placed on his father's grave.[33]

Ultimately, the prevalence of imposters in this period makes it more likely that Fieschi met an impersonator of Edward II rather than the king himself, who probably met his fate back in Berkeley in 1327. Imposters could be used as political pawns, as in the case of Lambert Simnel, who was trained and educated to impersonate the Earl of Warwick, son of the Duke of Clarence, and was even crowned in Dublin Cathedral in May 1487 as Edward VI by a Yorkist faction.[34] Edward V and Richard, Duke of York, the ill-fated Princes in the Tower, also had many imposters after their death, including Perkin Warbeck; Doherty states that for years after his victory at Bosworth Field, Henry VII was 'dogged' by impersonators.[35] It is a phenomenon that continues throughout history, and there have been impersonators of Joan of Arc, the Dauphin Louis, son of Louis XVI, and Anastasia Romanov.[36] In the days before the internet, or even photographs, only those personally acquainted with the impersonated person could detect those pretending, making imposters a commonplace occurrence in medieval Europe.

Canonisation of Edward II

There is also a theory that Manuel Fieschi's letter was, in fact, an attempt to support a campaign to have Edward canonised. It was very common in the later Middle Ages to see the canonisation and martyrdom of kings after their death. Piroyansky tells us that 'Medieval kings exuded an aura of sacredness and legitimacy which stemmed from the idea of the ruler as God's elect and anointed'.[37] This meant that if a king suffered a violent death or murder, it was common to build a cult around this sacredness, and this would lead to a campaign to canonise the late king, as is seen in the cases of Edward the Confessor, Edmund the Martyr and later, Charles I. After Edward II's deposition there was a modest movement to have him recognised in this manner, and his body (or that of his replacement) was visited by many on a pilgrimage to his tomb in Gloucester Cathedral.[38] Edward's cult was built around the themes of penitence and pilgrimage, something that would have had 'broad appeal' in the cultural context of the time, where acts of contrition were becoming more widely accepted as the appropriate way to repent one's sins.[39] Further to this, there was also growing interest in romantic literature in the 1330s and 1340s at the time the Fieschi letter was penned, with chivalric ideals a core focus of court life, and Arthurian legends a favourite of Isabella, Roger Mortimer and Edward III.[40] In these romantic legends, the characters would often end their days reclusively in penitence, displaying a running theme of this style of journey in the culture of the time. Attaching this penitent narrative to the fallen king, and demonstrating acceptance of his faults and repentance for them, shows the self-knowledge and self-mastery Edward lacked during his reign, helping to make up for some of his failures as a man and a king.

If this theory is viable, Manuel Fieschi's letter would be a convincing piece of evidence in the canonisation theory. The way in which Fieschi focused on religious elements of Edward II's journey, such as his adoption of a habit, his pilgrimages to shrines and to Avignon, and his choice to live in seclusion as a hermit, all point to an attempt to adopt the themes of penitence and pilgrimage to aid the campaign to have Edward canonised. Even the changing historiography of the death of Edward could be further evidence for this argument. Piroyansky argues that 'the regality of saintly kings was usually acknowledged in their iconography by depicting their crowns; however, their special attributes, linked to their life, death or miracles, were more central to their overall depiction'.[41] The red-hot poker, which appears later on in the history of Edward's death, could be an attempt to add iconography to Edward's religious campaign, to match previous icons such as the arrows of Edmund the Martyr. However, if Edward had, indeed, escaped his fate at Berkeley, as Fieschi states, he would not have been eligible to be martyred in the first place, and so this theory completely contradicts itself. Conversely, the evidence of a movement to canonise Edward disproves Fieschi's theory of the king's escape, by showing that his death was not doubted by his contemporaries.

The trope of secret survival

This conspiratorial narrative has been repeated following the deaths of many famous and infamous people and is found throughout history up until the present day. From the Princes in the Tower, Edward V and his brother, the Duke of York, to Jim Morrison, huge numbers of people in the public eye who pass away are said to still be alive, living in secret, or in seclusion, like Edward II. Why is this the case? An interesting quotation from King and Wilson's work on the case of Anna Anderson, an imposter of the Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia, states that people believed in Anderson 'to make sense of a complex tragedy, to find in the chaos of war and revolution some glimmer of hope, some hint of mercy, some proof that goodness still existed on the horizon of a new day'.[42] This theory of hope is one way of explaining the large numbers of people who are claimed to be alive after their death, and it is a possibility that in modern popular culture, this same hopeful idea is what fuels these rumours. Hope would certainly explain the belief that Princess Diana faked her own death in Paris in 1997: the martyred philanthropist is seen as saintly in popular culture, and

the obvious preferred outcome is that she is living out her days in seclusion, rather than meeting her unfortunate death in a car in Paris.[43]

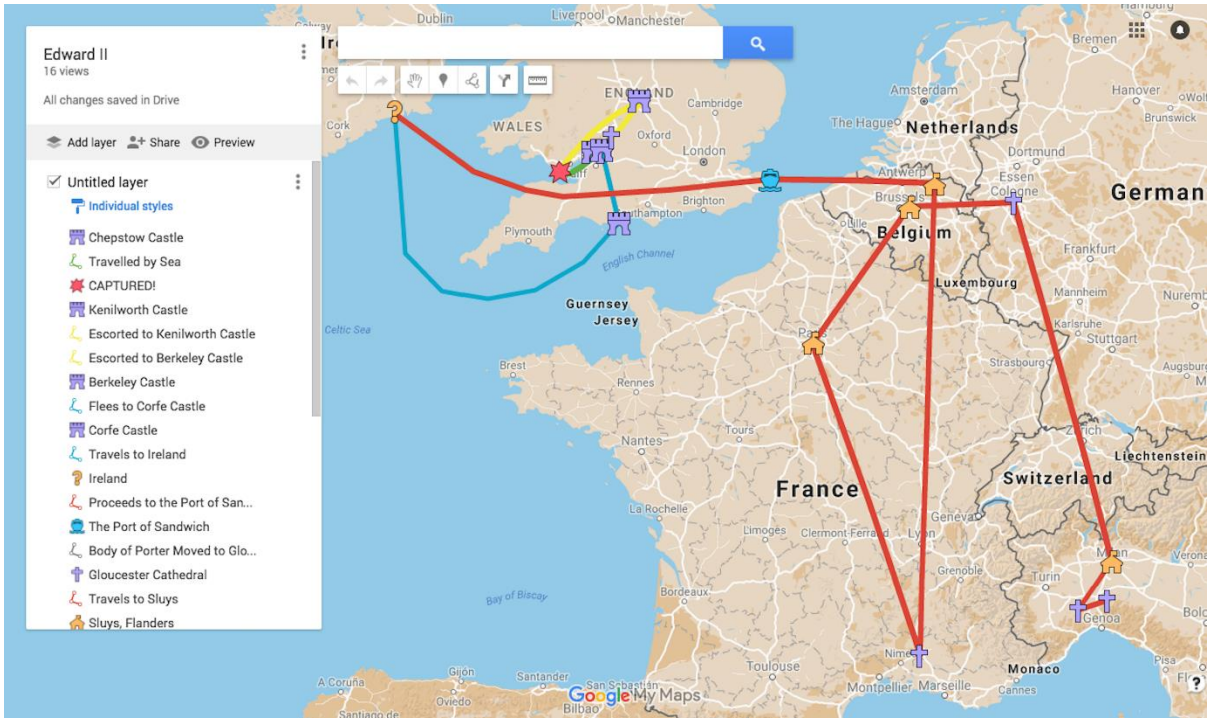
This certainly fits into the narrative of the theory that Elvis Presley is still alive. The culture of fandom surrounding Elvis Presley has been described as a 'strong form of religiosity', and this links to the Fieschi account of Edward II, as Doherty explains that 'deep in the folklore of many cultures lies the idea of the immortal king – or the king who dies but rises again'.[44] This imbedded idea is said to have deeply religious rooting, and could go some way to explaining the phenomenon of resurrected kings and the numbers of imposters who appear throughout history as part of the conspiratorial narrative, a narrative that is seemingly imbedded in our cultural folklore, thanks to our religious past.[45] The cult of Elvis Presley was deeply rooted in the popular culture of its time, and the crossover of the hope theory and the long-held belief in kings who rise again helps to place the seemingly ludicrous idea that Elvis is still alive into a more understandable cultural context.

The repeated examples of a belief in the conspiratorial narrative, in the royal and famous escaping their deaths, may simply come down to human nature. The work of Wood, Douglas and Sutton shows that psychologically, people inclined to believe conspiracy theories at all are more likely to believe conflicting theories at once.[46] They argue that 'the more participants believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered'.[47] In this case, people who believe that Edward II died through the use of red-hot poker rather than of natural causes are more likely to also believe that he survived beyond Berkeley Castle and travelled through Europe. This was shown to be supported by a general belief in authorities being involved in cover-ups and 'the monological nature of conspiracy belief appears to be driven not by conspiracy theories directly supporting one another but by broader beliefs supporting conspiracy theories in general'.[48] Thus, people inclined to believe in conspiratorial-style narratives are more likely to believe that Isabella and Mortimer had Edward murdered and covered it up. Ultimately, the cult of secretly surviving monarchs and celebrities simply comes down to the intricacies of human nature, and the individual subscription or rejection of conspiratorial ideas in general.

Conclusion

To conclude, the letter of Manuel Fieschi, while a fascinating adventure set in the narrative of an English monarchic upheaval, is simply too incredible to believe, with not enough evidence to support its fantastic tale. Edward II's reign came to an unfortunate end, due to his variation from the contemporary gender norms that delineated his role as king. This caused his barons to resent him and his favourites and his military campaigns to serve as a record of his failures, and led to his death at Berkeley Castle in 1327. Fieschi's letter was most likely penned after an encounter with an all too frequent imposter of the day, claiming to be the fallen King of England. Paralleling the conspiracies surrounding the Grand Duchess Anastasia, and Elvis Presley, the hopeful idea that maybe the well-known sorrowful story actually had a secret happy ending will continue to perpetuate the tradition of a belief in the dead still living. Lastly, human nature will always allow for the development of conspiracies such as these in the murky parts of history, where definitive answers died hundreds of years ago, along with the only people who will ever know the full, bloody truth.

Figure 3: Dynamic Media: Map of Edward II's movements according to Manuel Fieschi.



https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?hl=en_US&app=mp&mid=zOmpphMox5Gk.k88NiLXe88yM

This additional media element is a digital map which plots the supposed movements of the deposed king Edward II if, indeed, he escaped death at Berkeley Castle. The interactive map was created with software available online through Google's My Maps service, which is free to use and allows annotation, plotting of routes and points of interest and adding of descriptions to existing Google maps. Their programme is also free of copyright restrictions for non-commercial use, making it an excellent educational tool for creating visual demonstrations such as mapping Fieschi's tale. This narrative of events is plotted as told by the prominent papal notary and Bishop of Vercelli, Manuel Fieschi, in his letter to Edward III penned between 1336 and 1338. The information for this map is taken from a translation of Fieschi's original letter, as printed in The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II 1321-1326 by Natalie Fryde. Fryde is a historian who specialises in medieval history as well as the history of Edward II, but the excerpt used for this map was a direct transcription of Fieschi's letter, not Fryde's interpretation of it. This map does not intend to show where Edward II actually travelled to, but to demonstrate pictorially the Fieschi narrative for greater understanding. This narrative is directly challenged by historical evidence, so is treated purely as a story for the purpose of this map. In accordance with this, no other historical information or speculation has been included in the descriptions within the map, as it is intended to represent the Fieschi narrative as told specifically by Manuel Fieschi in his original letter. Each line and icon contains descriptions of each part of the fantastic saga written by Fieschi and plots the movements of Edward II throughout the narrative. Some points on the map are approximate due to a lack of information in Fieschi's letter for specific locations, but the map contains all areas mentioned by Fieschi and what he states Edward II did in those locations.

Further Reading:

http://www.ianmortimer.com/essays/index.htm
This collection of Ian Mortimer's essays is public and free to access. It has various interesting and thought-provoking articles related to Edward II, Isabella of France and Roger Mortimer. Although issues with Mortimer's motives have been outlined above, his perspective is a good way of exploring new avenues in this area of history.

https://www.royal.uk/edward-ii-r-1307-1327
This is the British monarchy's official biography of Edward II. While basic, it demonstrates the way in which he is remembered in the context of the ongoing British monarchy.

http://www.britannia.com/history/castles/berkeley.html
This article is a history of Berkeley Castle as described by John Timbs, a 19th-century author and antiquarian. It follows the narrative of the most brutal versions of Edward's murder in his cell at Berkeley.

http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-ordinances-of-1311
The British Library website has a digital manuscript of the ordinances of 1311 for public view, an interesting primary document essential in the history of Edward II's reign and factors in his downfall.

http://edwardthesecond.blogspot.co.uk/
This is an in-depth analysis blog surrounding everything to do with Edward II. It is written by Katheryn Warner, who holds a BA and an MA with Distinction in medieval history and literature from the University of Manchester and who states initially that 'everything you think you know about Edward II is wrong; welcome to the site which examines the events, issues and personalities of Edward II's reign'.

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