Introduction

Welcome to *History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond*. The word *medieval* refers to the period between ancient and modern times. In this book, you’ll explore this period in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. You’ll sometimes go beyond the medieval period to look at what happened before and after it.

Studying history involves figuring out what happened in the past, and why. People who study history are a lot like detectives. They ask questions and study clues. They form hypotheses, or educated guesses. Then they test their ideas against the evidence.

Many scholars study the past. Among these “history detectives” are archaeologists and historians. Scholars like these are interested in much more than names and dates. They try to understand people’s cultures and ways of life. They study values, beliefs, customs, political systems, and much more.

Archaeologists study the distant past by examining objects that people left behind. These objects are called *artifacts*. They can include anything that people made or used. Some examples are clothing, tools, buildings, weapons, and coins. Clues like these can tell us a great deal about what cultures were like before they had written records.

Historians both record and interpret the past. They try to understand how events are connected by tracing their causes and effects. Historians are most interested in the last few thousand years, when people began leaving written records.

Historians use two types of sources to study the past. Primary sources come from the period being studied. Often they are written documents such as diaries, letters, and official records. Artifacts and works of art are also primary sources.

Secondary sources are materials that interpret primary sources. For instance, a historian might write someone’s biography, or life story. To do so, the historian might use primary sources such as letters and diaries. The biography itself is a secondary source. Other people can learn useful things from the historian’s work.

History is like a mystery that never ends. That’s because scholars’ ideas about the past change as they learn more. In this book, you’ll join the history detectives in exploring the past. You’ll study clues and weigh the evidence. You’ll make and defend your own educated guesses. You’ll see for yourself that history is very much alive!