

## **Assumptions that strangle students' understanding of the Middle Ages**

### **The crucial importance of identifying students' misconceptions**

This article explains why it's essential to identify students' misconceptions about periods and topics and plan teaching to challenge them – this is one of the most important steps in improving students' historical learning about all topics and periods. This can be read in conjunction with the article on students' preconceptions in the HA publication *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History*.

### **The deficit mindset: attitudes to the Middle Ages**

*I have a logical, scientific mind because I live in the modern world*

*You had a sincere belief in your religion because you lived in the early modern world*

*They were superstitious because they lived in the Middle Ages.*

These lines suggest how easy it can be to generalise negatively about the Middle Ages and how easily we can assume that everything is so different and so much more superior today. This deficit model of thinking – assessing medieval society and people by how far they appear to fall short of life today – seems to be at the heart of many negative preconceptions about the period. There's nothing new in this – people have taken comfort from looking down on the Middle Ages for centuries – but, despite the alternative perspectives provided by historians' research, our culture continues to condescend to and underestimate the people of the Middle Ages, creating negative interpretations students pick up from films, computer games, TV comedy etc.

The most basic and important misconception about the people of the period is that they were less intelligent than ourselves. Research undertaken by Dr Jason Todd of the University of Oxford in 2018 suggests that at least 90% of over 700 students surveyed saw the people of the Middle Ages as less intelligent than ourselves. It's obvious, isn't it – they didn't have mobile phones, electricity, etc etc. so they must have been less intelligent.

This means that in planning a scheme of work, whether at KS3, GCSE or at A level, we need to make identifying and challenging such misconceptions a priority because they seriously hinder students' understanding of the period.

## **What misconceptions may students have?**

The list below identifies some of the misleading (or, to be more direct, simply wrong!) assumptions which undermine students' capacity to understand the lives, motives and decisions of people who lived during the Middle Ages. These ideas may not be held explicitly (i.e. students may not realise they have these ideas unless asked) but the tendency to make judgements based on comparisons with today means these assumptions lurk unspoken in students' minds – and they'll still be there at A level if unchallenged at KS3.

**A time of continuity** – there was little or no change of any kind during the Middle Ages

**An absence of new ideas and thought** – people were almost all illiterate and uninterested in learning which contributed to an absence of new ideas

**An age dominated by superstition** – people were gullible, unable to apply logic or to challenge what they were told by authorities so, for example, hardly anyone asked questions about religious beliefs.

**People could do nothing to safeguard their health** – people were fatalistic about their health, relied on magical remedies, made no attempts to clean streets and were uncaring about dirt.

**Individuals, especially the nobility, were only interested in their own ambitions** – people were self-centred, uninterested in the welfare of others or of communities in general.

**Violence was widespread** – there was general use of and acceptance of violence in everyday life with a much higher level of and tolerance of violence than in other periods.

**Kings were able to behave like tyrants** – there were no limits on the powers of monarchs who were able to behave however they wished and had no concern for the welfare of their people.

**Treachery was commonplace** – nobles were eager to rebel to enhance their own power and wealth and there was little concept of loyalty

**People didn't travel** – and had little knowledge of the world beyond their immediate locality nor any interest in wider events.

These are all seriously misleading generalisations and I could quote any number of extracts from historians to challenge them but I'll choose just two. I've used the first before but it definitely stands repetition because of the respect the author shows towards the people of the Middle Ages. It's from Dr David Crouch's introduction to his book *Medieval Britain c1000-1500* (Cambridge 2017):

'Reading these chapters will take you back amongst the medieval people of Great Britain, and, if you've not met them before, I think you'll find that they were not at all what you might expect from the use of that adjective. ... [they] had a high idea of the rights of the political community of their various realms and an ability to articulate it from which we still benefit. They despised and resisted political corruption; sought true justice; hoped the best for their own lives and for their children, whom they loved; met the horrors of pandemic and disease with a fortitude that humbles us, their descendants; and pursued their own prosperity with enterprise, doggedness and originality ... For all our differences, medieval people were our ancestors in thought, aspirations and manners, as much as in our genes.'

### **Why is challenging these assumptions so important?**

The assumptions listed above may seem caricatures but they exist and feed off each other, creating a one-dimensional, utterly negative view of the medieval world. It's important to create courses that challenge them because:

1. They are poor history. Students deserve to be introduced to a more representative, more realistic picture of the period.
2. The great medievalist, Sir Richard Southern, said 'we learn by being puzzled and excited ...' In my experience students do learn more when they are puzzled about the behaviour or choices made by an individual or group. Puzzlement leads to interest and wanting to find answers – and reading! There's no chance of puzzlement when students simply assume that medieval people had one-dimensional motivations i.e. they were simply greedy, ambitious or not very bright.
3. Treating the past with respect isn't easy when there are so many references in popular culture that deride the past. If students are to build respect for the past they should start as early as possible and in secondary schools that almost always means with the Middle Ages.

4. Good answers to GCSE and A level questions need to show more complex understanding of the period than is reflected in the list of assumptions above. It is far easier for students to develop more sophisticated answers if they see the medieval world as complex and varied, its people as varyingly intelligent and principled as people today.

5. Much coverage of the period at KS3 is likely to cement rather than challenge these assumptions – think of all those wars and rebellions, all that hardship and plague. Do students realise people ever laughed or had new ideas in the Middle Ages? We need to choose content carefully to create a more balanced perspective of the period and challenge misconceptions.

6. Giving students a more positive, intriguing and varied picture of the Middle Ages may make them more likely to approach medieval history at GCSE or A level positively or more likely to choose medieval options at university.

### **Moving forward in challenging misconceptions and assumptions**

1. When planning a course, we need to create time to identify and then challenge the preconceptions which strangle students' understanding of the period. In my view, the three most important elements of planning are therefore:

a) identifying your takeaways – what you want students to learn and take away from the course in term of historical knowledge and understanding of how history is studied

b) the preconceptions that students are bringing to the course about your takeaways – the period and its people (and about how we study history).

c) the features of those topics that students are likely to struggle to understand

2. Students need to be made aware at the beginning of a course of their assumptions about the Middle Ages and that these may change during the course. For an example of how to do this see the link at the end of this article to first chapter in the Medieval Lives series 'What are your ideas about the Middle Ages?'

3. Instead of cementing deficit-model thinking – by failing to challenge 'how far are they falling short of life today?' assumptions – we ought to include work exploring what the people of the Middle Ages were doing successfully, what improvements they were making in their lives, what

qualities they had that we can admire or were similar to our own and what ideals and principles were important to them.

4. However that last point doesn't mean creating a heavenly glow around medieval life! Elements of the assumptions were true (as they are for all periods) for some people at some times but students need to explore the variety and contrasts of the period to learn to challenge generalisations (one of the great benefits of historical study). We therefore need to help students see and understand the paradoxes of human behaviour, for example people's ability to think logically and idealistically but also behave quite differently, driven by emotions and prejudices – or how decisions were often not based on the best choice available to an individual at the time but on the least-worst option, the one least likely to have terrible consequences.

To exemplify these last points here's a passage from Carl Watkins' book *Stephen: The Reign of Anarchy* (Penguin 2015 page 14) – exploring the situation in the late autumn of 1135 as Henry I neared death:

'The temptation is to write these barons off as blood-soaked and on the make: looking forward, perhaps, to the moment when, on Henry's death, restraints loosened and financial demands were stilled, and their own ambitions might be given a freer rein. And yet these men were not – for the most part – sword-wielding thugs. They were sharp political operators who were conscious that they had a great deal to lose, as well as some things to gain if, when the king died, chaos should ensue. There was no incentive for those who lived so well in the Norman house to pull it down about their ears. But here lies the rub. For running under the surface of such rational calculations were feuds with neighbours, quarrels among kin, grievances against the dead king and his old regime. Rationally – collectively – barons could surely see the virtues of order, but suppressed emotions and frustrated ambitions would have the power to generate violence when Henry died and the king's tough love was lost.'

## **Related material on students' preconceptions and the nature of medieval life**

The first chapter of my on-line textbook **Medieval Lives** provides the resources to identify and discuss students' misconceptions. See:

1: What are your ideas about the Middle Ages?

This chapter's purpose help students identify the ideas they already have about the period, whether they see it negatively or positively and then sets up the overall enquiry 'Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?'

See <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section1.html>

The conclusions of the other chapters in **Medieval Lives** then return to that enquiry question and prompt students to reflect on whether their ideas about the Middle Ages have changed or developed.

For these chapters see <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAResources.html>

Also:

**What would you like teachers and students to know ...?** (in *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* pp.8-11)

This is a series of short contributions from medievalists on either the period c1000-c1348 or c1348-c1530 – these challenge some of the preconceptions about the Middle Ages listed above.

See <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/WhatTeachersStudents.pdf>