

Three Myths About the Middle Ages

A myth is a story that many people believe – but is not true. Here are three myths about the Middle Ages. Try them on your family – if they believe these myths you can tell them they're wrong.

1. Medieval people thought the earth was flat ...

... and were afraid that if they sailed too close to the edge they would fall off the world.

One of the greatest historians in the Middle Ages was Bede, born in 673, 400 years before the Norman Conquest. Bede was a monk at Jarrow in the north-east of England. He was a highly-intelligent man, interested in every kind of knowledge, collecting and reading books from many other monasteries as well as his own. In one of his books Bede wrote that the shape of the earth is 'a globe like a ball'.

Most people agreed with Bede that the earth is shaped like a ball. The Greeks had known this long before the Middle Ages and people continued to believe that the world was a globe, not flat at all. Cheap, handwritten books read by working people also said the earth was a globe and not flat.

However a handful of writers did believe the earth was flat. Unfortunately historians in the 1700s picked out two of these writers and used them as evidence to claim that everyone in the Middle Ages thought the earth was flat – even though they were heavily outnumbered by those who said the earth was a globe. This was deeply unfair. Most medieval people did NOT think the earth was flat!



2. People didn't travel and never left their home villages

Guess what? This isn't true either! Here's a quick list of travellers:

Everyone who went to market in a local town (just about everyone); anyone who joined or followed the king's army to fight in Scotland, Wales, France or on crusade to north-east Europe or Jerusalem; thousands and thousands of devout pilgrims walking, riding or sailing to Compostella in Spain, to Rome or Jerusalem or the even larger numbers travelling to national shrines such as the tomb of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury or many, many, many people visiting religious sites within ten miles of home; judges and lawyers riding up and down the country to the law courts; saddle-sore royal officials and messengers; lords and commons attending Parliament or giving evidence or sitting on juries at courts in nearby towns.

Devout: people with a very strong religious belief.

The Commons: the working people; everyone who wasn't a lord.

Shrine: a holy place, often linked to a saint.

Nowadays far more people learn to drive than learn to ride but horses were the cars of the Middle Ages.

Riding was an everyday activity for many people and the miles some people covered around the country shows they must have been very fit, even when they were in their 50s and 60s.



And then there are all the stonemasons, carpenters, painters, glaziers, labourers who built the churches, cathedrals, castles and houses; merchants travelling to fairs selling wine and silks, cloth and spices; pedlars with back-packs full of ribbons, trinkets and handwritten books; traders taking fresh and dried fish inland; drovers slowly chivvying cattle, sheep and geese many miles to market; sailors bringing coals south from Newcastle, wine from France, timber from the Baltic or taking wool and cloth to Europe; refugees from the north who fled to the midlands from William the Conqueror's army or fled invasions by the Scots; immigrants who came to work in Britain and those who left to live overseas.



Travelling was much slower and harder then than now but don't be fooled – medieval people did travel and many travelled a lot.

3. Everyone had the same attitudes and ideas in the Middle Ages

This isn't the same kind of myth but is incredibly, phenomenally, tremendously important if you are to understand life in the Middle Ages (or any other period of history).

People like 'generalising' about the Middle Ages. A generalisation is a statement such as 'medieval kings were cruel' or 'medieval peasants were downtrodden and helpless'. We call these statements generalisations because they're very 'general' – they make everybody or every aspect of life sound the same.

Here are more generalisations about the Middle Ages which are very misleading:

The nobles were selfish and ambitious.

Castles were dark and uncomfortable.

The streets were muddy and dirty.

Medieval people were far more violent than people today.



But generalisations are dangerous things. They make our brains lazy. It's easy to believe a generalisation like 'nobles were selfish and ambitious'. It's much harder to work out all the different ways that nobles behaved. Here's one example – in 1381 the earl of March died and his heir was a boy. The King gave his lands to four noblemen to look after while the boy grew up. These earls could have made money for themselves by selling off the animals and woodland but they didn't. They looked after the boy's lands so well they were worth a lot more when he was old enough to inherit them. Those nobles didn't behave selfishly at all. Others would have been selfish but they weren't.

So don't be fooled by generalisations. Have fun challenging them and looking for the variety in medieval life.

Conclusion: Why do people keep picking on the Middle Ages?

Why do people believe these myths about the Middle Ages? it's because ever since the Middle Ages people have wanted to think that they are the brightest, cleverest people in history – so they've picked on the Middle Ages and said that the people were stupid. It makes modern people feel superior – but we're not. We just live later in time and have the advantage of all the developments that have taken place since the Middle Ages.