

Interpretations in History

Interpretations are different people's versions of the past. They could be written in History books, turned into documentaries about the past, or even made into fictionalised accounts through novels and films. Different people often give very different interpretations of the same event or person in History – it depends which evidence they chose to use and find important. While one historian might call the Black Death a 'disaster', another might see it as 'a turning point in the power of the peasantry'.

Historian Terry Deary called his book about the medieval period the *Measly Middle Ages*. What do you think he meant by this?

Look at the following sources, then complete the activities which follow to help you decide how far you agree with Terry Deary's interpretation of the period.

Starter sources

Source A

For peasants who survived the Black Death, these were good times. Prices were low and wages were high. They were not afraid to stand up for themselves against the barons and lords, the Church, even the King.

From a modern history textbook

Source B

The acts of the priests have deeply offended God. Priests are polluted by every kind of sin. They never think of using the money of the church to help the poor, but stuff their own money bags.

Written by Edmund Eynsham, a holy man and critic of the Church in the 1190s

Source C

Even in the summer, people did not work all the time in the medieval times. In fact, they had many holy days – more than one hundred a year!

From a school textbook, *The Middle Ages*, by John D Clare

Source D

Beef, four calves, two half sheep, a breast of mutton, a breast of veal, five lambs, six pigs, seven rabbits, eggs, butter, milk and cream, pepper, vinegar, cloves, sugar, dates and honey.

From the account book of a 15th century manor, showing food provided by the lord to celebrate their Saint's day

Challenge sources

Source E

It is the custom in England, as in other countries, for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are their serfs. This means that they are bound by law and custom to plough the fields of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow and carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind.

Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* (c. 1395)

Source F

To be a member of the Cistercian order ... is now believed to be the surest way to heaven ... Certainly many of their regulations seem severe ... they wear nothing made with furs or linen ... They have two tunics with hoods, but no additional garments ... they do not take more than one meal a day, except on Sunday. They never leave the cloister but for the purpose of labour, nor do they ever speak, either there or elsewhere, save only to the abbot or prior ... While they look after the stranger and the sick, they inflict intolerable tortures on their own bodies, for the health of their souls.

William of Malmesbury, *Deeds of the Kings of England* (c. 1140)

Source G

The peasants ... wanted to ... make use of the woods, forests and waters. Each assembly of English people appointed two deputies who were to meet in order to press their case. But (William), learning of this, promptly sent a group of soldiers to scatter the peasant gathering. They arrested all the deputies and some other peasants, having first chopped off their hands and feet, they sent them back home to their families, helpless for the rest of their lives.

William of Poitiers, *Chronicle* (c.1090)

Source H

Rohese, wife of Richard, son of Count Gilbert, holds Standon. Land for 24 ploughs. 29 villagers with a priest. 15 smallholders, 2 freemen and a Frenchman have 12 ploughs. 9 cottagers and 8 slaves. 5 mills at 45s; meadow for 24 ploughs; pasture for livestock; woodland, 600 pigs. Total value in 1086 £33; before 1066 £34. Archbishop Stigand held this manor in 1066. In this manor were six freemen.

Domesday entry for Standon in Hertfordshire (1086)

Tasks

- 1) Look at Source I on the picture sheet. What does it suggest about the effects of the Black Death?
- 2) Now read Source A. Does it agree with Source I? Why might they be so different?
- 3) What do sources C and D suggest about life for ordinary people in the Middle Ages?
- 4) What do source E and G suggest about power in medieval England?
- 5) According to source F, what sort of life did the medieval church encourage people to have?
- 6) Terry Deary is the author of the Horrible History series. He argues that the medieval times were measly – the peasants were revolting and life was generally very unpleasant. He writes about very few positive aspects of life in the period. Which sources would support his interpretation? Explain your choices.
- 7) Which sources oppose his interpretation? Explain your choices.
- 8) Overall, how accurate (correct) is Terry Deary's interpretation of the medieval period? Use the sources and your own knowledge to answer the question.