

## Judging John

Historians have argued for a long time about how we should remember King John. Their ideas have often been affected by their own views of what makes a good King. They all base their interpretations on the limited evidence of what John's contemporaries (people who lived at the same time as him) wrote down. But these people had their own opinions and prejudices about John too – so making a judgement about what kind of King he was is actually very tricky!

### Starter/research tasks

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1. Watch the following clip from Disney's *Robin Hood* film:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H2rO4HC8s8>. King John is called the 'Phony King of England'. Jot down some of the claims which are made about him in the song in the box below:

**Claims made about King John in the song:**

2. Ask five people what they know or think about King John. Try to ask people of different ages to find out what they learnt about King John at school. Record what they tell you in the box below.

**People's views about King John:**

Contemporary sources task

Use the contemporary source sheet to explore some of the evidence about King John that was written in his own time.

Source	Key words/phrases	Negative/positive view of John	Who wrote it? Why was it written?	Why might they see John in this way?
A				
B				
C				
D				
E				
F				
G				

**Key questions:** What impression of John do the contemporary sources give? Can we rely on their views of John?

Interpretations tasks

1. Read the source written by a Tudor historian and the information about Tudor interpretations. Explain why the Tudor's saw King John differently from how his contemporaries (people alive in his time) saw him.

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2. How did the Victorians see King John? Pick out some words and phrases from the Victorian interpretations to help explain your answer.

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3. Explain why the Victorians viewed John in this way.

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## Has History judged King John fairly?

4. Explain, in your own words, what the following 20<sup>th</sup> century historians have said about King John. You could use quotations from the sources to help support your answers.

**A.J. Poole:**

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**W.L. Warren:**

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**Maurice Ashley:**

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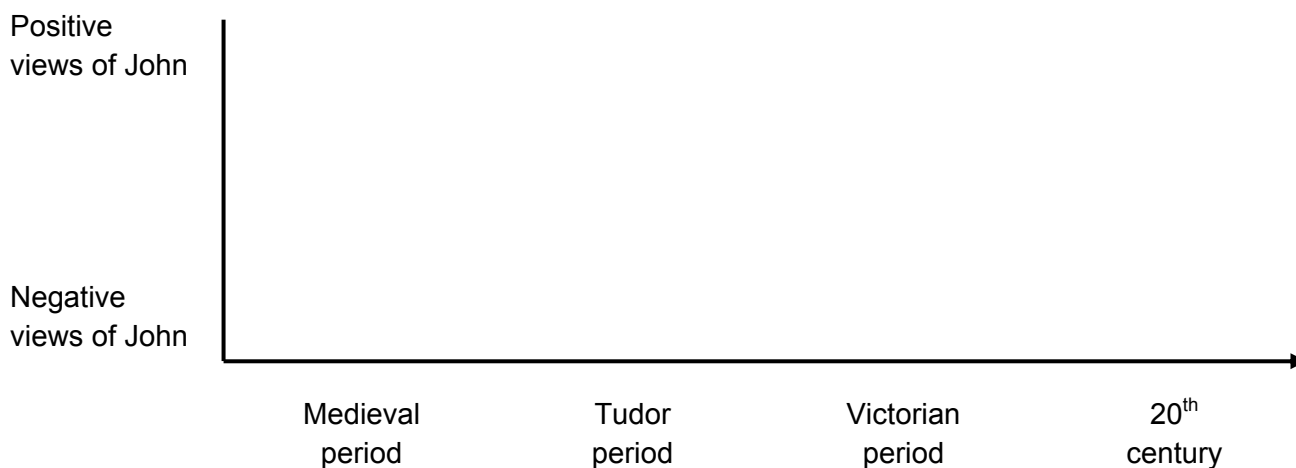
**R. Turner:**

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5. Draw a line on the graph below to show how interpretations of King John have changed through History.



Conclusion tasks

Why is it difficult to make a judgement about John?

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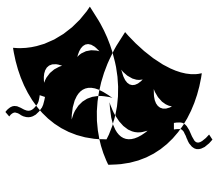


Do you think History has judged King John fairly?

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	<p>Remember the Disney 'Phony King of England' song? Write your own version of the song which gives your view of how King John should be remembered.</p>
	<p>Write a script for a debate between several historians who disagree about King John's reputation.</p>
	<p>Design a new portrait of King John for the National Portrait Gallery which reflects your view of how he should be remembered.</p>
	<p>Write an encyclopaedia entry for King John which explains why such different views have been held about him through History.</p>

Contemporary sources (sources from King John's time)

Medieval chroniclers tended to write about John very negatively. Most of the people who could read and write in England at the time were monks. Monks thought that a 'good' King should protect the power and property of the Church, live a moral life and respect the rule of the Pope. John had conflicted with the Pope, and many monks thought that his collection of high taxes made him immoral.

<p><b>Source A</b></p> <p>'The servants of a certain sheriff somewhere in Wales brought to the royal court a robber. He had robbed and murdered a priest. John said, "He has killed an enemy of mine, let him go."'</p> <p>This was written by Roger of Wendover, a monk from St Albans' Abbey. He never met John but wrote about him very critically. It is possible that he was influenced by the gossip of those who visited the abbey.</p>	<p><b>Source B</b></p> <p>'John was a tyrant. He was a wicked ruler who did not behave like a king. He was greedy and took as much money as he could from his people. Foul as it is, Hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of John.'</p> <p>This was written by a monk called Matthew Paris in 1235. He wasn't born when John became King and never met him. He also lived at St Albans' Abbey and spent much time reading Roger of Wendover's work.</p>
<p><b>Source C</b></p> <p>'We commit the Jews dwelling in your city to your charge; if anyone attempts to harm them always protect and assist them.'</p> <p>Written in one of the laws passed by John.</p>	<p><b>Source D</b></p> <p>'(After signing the Magna Carta) King John's mental state underwent a great change ... He started to gnash his teeth and roll his eyes in fury. Then he would pick up sticks and straws and gnaw them like a lunatic ... His uncontrolled gestures gave indications ... of the madness that was upon him.'</p> <p>Matthew Paris, <i>Greater Chronicle</i>, c. 1260.</p>
<p><b>Source E</b></p> <p>'He (King John) was generous and liberal to outsiders but stole from the English. Since he trusted more in foreigners than in the English, he had been abandoned before the end by his people, and his own end was little mourned.'</p> <p>This was written in the <i>Barnwell Abbey Chronicle</i>, c. 1220. This chronicle tended to give a more balanced view of John.</p>	<p><b>Source F</b></p> <p>'King John had captured Arthur (a rival to the throne) and kept him alive in prison for some time in the castle of Rouen ... After dinner on the Thursday before Easter when he was drunk and possessed by the Devil, King John killed him with his own hand, and tying a heavy stone to the body, cast it into the Seine.'</p> <p>This was written in the <i>Margam Abbey Chronicle</i>, c. 1205. There is a lot of uncertainty about what happened to Arthur.</p>
<p><b>Source G</b></p> <p>'John is far too hard on us. He takes our land if we do not obey his commands. He even takes our sons as hostages, in case we rebel against him.'</p> <p>This was written by Roger Bigod, Earl of Norfolk. He was a baron during the reign of John. Like many of the barons he hated John for raising taxes and reducing his own powers.</p>	

## Tudor interpretations of King John

Historians writing in the Tudor period saw John very differently. By this time, many people thought the Pope had become too powerful and wanted their King to stand up for England. Henry VIII challenged the power of the Pope by setting up the Church of England and making himself its leader. He faced some of the same problems that John had, fearing attack from France and Spain. Tudor historians tended to present John as an earlier version of Henry VIII, so they were much more positive about him.

‘What a disgrace and a shame that the barons rebelled against King John and did not give him help in his lawful wars.’

An extract from *Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Religion*, 1571.

## Victorian interpretations of King John

Historians writing in the Victorian period saw John differently again. They wrote about him as a cruel villain. The Victorians tended to be strict in their religious views and moral standards – most attended church regularly. They were therefore shocked by sources which suggested that John had committed acts of cruel violence and behaved adulterously toward women. They emphasised the accounts of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris.

‘His punishments were cruel: the starvation of children, crushing of old men under the copes of lead. His court was a brothel where no woman was safe from the royal lust. He laughed at priests even during his coronation. Hell is spoiled by the fouler presence of King John.’

J.R. Green, 1875. Which contemporary source about John do you think Green might have been influenced by?

‘John was the worst of all our kings ... a faithless son, a treacherous brother ... polluted with every crime ... in the whole view there is no redeeming trait.’

W. Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England*, 1875.

## 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of King John

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians tended to have very mixed views about King John. Some suggested that he had good administrative (organisational) skills and worked hard, but that he was a victim of bad luck, facing a powerful Pope and unruly barons. They looked again at the accounts of medieval monks and argued that they were unreliable. They also studied many court records written at the time of King John and found examples of positive laws he passed. Most recently, some historians have focused on John's skills as a military leader and decided that he was very successful in this way.

<p>'Then, by a brilliant stroke, John captured his supplanter (someone trying to seize control) ... with incredible speed he covered a distance of 80 miles in 48 hours – he descended on the castle, relieved it and killed or captured the besiegers. This great success was the last on French soil until Edward III.'</p> <p>Based on A.J. Poole's <i>Domesday Book to Magna Carta</i>, 1954.</p>	<p>'John had the administrative ability of a great ruler but he never got the chance to prove his skills. From the moment he began his rule, rivals and traitors tried to cheat him out of his inheritance.'</p> <p>W.L. Warren, 1961.</p>
<p>'The monastic chroniclers ... have been shown by modern research to be completely unreliable in what they said about John, because their works were largely compiled out of gossip and rumour directed against a monarch who had upset the Church ... King John was ... a first-class general, a clever diplomat and a ruler who developed ... English law and government.'</p> <p>Maurice Ashley, <i>Life and Times of King John</i>, 1972.</p>	<p>'John had potential for great success. He had intelligence, administrative ability and he was good at planning military campaigns. However, too many personality flaws held him back.'</p> <p>R. Turner, 1994.</p>



### Teaching notes

These activities were planned to form a two/three lesson sequence on interpretations of King John. Some prior knowledge on John's reign as King, his rivals, relationship with the Church and the Magna Carta will be necessary for students to engage fully with the evidence. The worksheets and source pages could be used to support the following order of activities, or the source sheets might be used on their own to support many other approaches.

### Suggested tasks

The first two tasks could be set for homework using p.1 as support.

1. Show student's Disney's 'Phony King of England' song from the *Robin Hood* cartoon film. It is available on YouTube here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H2rO4HC8s8>. Ask them to record what is said about him in the song. (The link was correct at time of publication, but do check first!)
2. Ask students to conduct a survey of five people they know, ideally of varying ages, to find out what their views of King John are. These ideas could then be fed back at the beginning of the next lesson.
3. Ask students to read the contemporary sources on p.6 carefully, and to complete the table on p. 2. Discuss why medieval chroniclers tended to view John negatively.
4. Using the interpretations from pp.7-8, complete the tasks about interpretations from pp.3-5. The final tasks, at the bottom of p.5 might be used to give students different options for how to respond to the big enquiry question.

### Useful further reading

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- <http://www.historytoday.com/graham-e-seel/good-king-john>
- [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/ks3/history/middle\\_ages/king\\_john\\_magna\\_carta/revision/1/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/ks3/history/middle_ages/king_john_magna_carta/revision/1/)