When were the Middle Ages?

This is intended as a quick introduction, helping pupils clarify when the Middle Ages was and helping you identify what they do and don't know and aren't sure of in terms of chronology and common names for historical periods.

The main objectives are therefore to help pupils:

a) identify where the Middle Ages fit chronologically into a broader overview

b) understand why the period is called 'the Middle Ages' – what it's in the middle of!

c) gain confidence in using the names of periods of history and understand why dates beginning with 12 are in the 13th century etc

Resources

Resources comprise:

- a set of 5 PowerPoint slides (there's no ideal order in which to use them – it's a mobile menu!)

- 3 pages of text which covers much the same material as the slides. The text also has a brief introduction and a section on page 2 about whether the timeline covers the whole of British history.

- 2 worksheets (pages 4 and 5) containing the timelines on slides 1 and 3

A possible route through this resource

Use slide 1 (and/or worksheet 1 - page 4) to ask pupils if they can identify where the Middle Ages are on the timeline. You could also ask them to identify other periods – either 'what other periods can you identify?' or 'where would put the Tudors on the timeline?' and similar.

You could also use this slide and slide 4 to find out how well pupils use 'twelfth century' for dates beginning with 1100 etc. If there's uncertainty about this it may be helpful to use the activity, Making Sense of BC and AD which demonstrates why the words and numbers are out of sync.

© Ian Dawson

You can find the activity at:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/MakingSenseofBCAD.html

An alternative approach is to set up a class game, using the questions on slide 2 or your own versions of those questions.

Slide 3 (and worksheet 2 – page 5) allow you to look more closely at the Middle Ages. You could use this in conjunction with finding out whether pupils know of any events or people in the Middle Ages and where they might put them on the timeline. You could also pick out key events you're going to cover and position them on the line.

Jason Todd's research on pupils' perceptions of the Middle Ages shows that Henry VIII gets lots of mentions as a medieval figure so don't be surprised if Henry appears in answers – this is partly because he 'looks medieval', partly because students may not have covered any medieval history, partly because they haven't spent enough time working explicitly on 'periods' – and I'm sure there are other reasons too.

Slide 5 helps explain the term 'Middle Ages' – ask students what words they'd use to explain the attitudes of the people of the Renaissance to the Middle Ages and why they wished to be linked to the Greeks and Romans. Good vocab development! You could alternatively do this physically with a couple of pupils out at the front representing each group and acting out the attitudes – have the medieval group sitting while the others stand.

Having used the slides, you could use the text pages as follow-up to consolidate understanding. That's obviously just one route through this material. Alternatively you could turn the text and slides round and work from the text and integrate slides into the lesson but there's so many ways of juggling them I won't try to spell them out or we'd be in grandma and eggs territory.

What's not here?

One issue I haven't covered in detail (though it's mentioned in the margin on p3) is that the terms used in the timeline only apply to European history and that the histories of other cultures have their own periodisation. You may wish to develop this point here.

© Ian Dawson

Developing Chronological Understanding of the Middle Ages

One problem that pupils often have in relation to the Middle Ages is the overlap of Saxons, Vikings and Normans. They assume these peoples lived in England consecutively rather than at the same time. Organising a physical timeline with pupils as Saxons, Vikings or Normans will demonstrate the overlaps very clearly – for an example of a similar activity see:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DurationTimelines.html#RSV

For another physical timeline which provides a very effective overview see the Big Human timeline which also discusses the overlap of Saxons, Vikings and Normans.

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigHumanTimeline.html

To build on the *When were the Middle Ages?* activity and enhance pupils' outline knowledge of the period see chapter 4 of *Medieval Lives* which provides a century by century summary and tasks:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section4.html

In addition there's a scripted drama which also helps pupils see the patterns of events:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JourneyToMiddleAges.html

Other discussions and activities on chronological understanding can be found at:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/chronology/index.htm

© Ian Dawson