3. What kinds of things mattered to people in the Middle Ages?

Teachers' Notes

This question, like that in Section 2 (Were medieval people very different from us?) is, I suspect a question rarely asked explicitly at KS3 but I've created this material because I think it's a crucial question if students are to understand the period and combat the negative preconceptions they often have about the Middle Ages. Other reasons for tackling this question are that:

- students need to understand what mattered to people in order to build effective explanations for their decisions and actions.

- less historically, perhaps, this also helps students identify ideas and experiences that we have in common with people of the Middle Ages (e.g. what they called being of 'good worship' we'd call 'being respected') and this may in turn help students reflect on what matters to them in the present.

The resources are threefold:

- this set of pages of students' text which resembles both a textbook and resource book – some are obviously more one than the other.

- PowerPoint slides which will help with the practicalities of teaching

- an activity based on a class set of role-cards, covering a range of individuals from kings and queens to beggars and villeins and what mattered to each of them.

What follows summarises these resources and how they might be used.

Objectives

Using these resources will enable students to:

a. develop their knowledge of many of the things that mattered to people in the Middle Ages (such as the importance of the harvest for providing enough food, the centrality of religion, of their families and of their desire to be respected by others)

b. identify some of the similarities and differences of what mattered across society

c. gain a sense of some common strands of human experience linking people in the Middle Ages and ourselves – they weren't that different as people back then!

d. reflect on what matters to themselves and their own families

Stage 1: Pages 1-3, Introductory material

These pages and PowerPoint sides 1-5 provide a quick start which makes the main ideas behind this material explicit by:

- asking students to think about what matters to them
- identifying and recording students' preconceptions about what mattered to people in the Middle Ages. This identification of what is already in students' minds and then comparing this later with what they've learned from their work is central to effective learning.

Page 3 (Slide 5) could be used as initial stimulus to get students thinking or, preferably, to extend their first thoughts.

This material is therefore about getting ideas into play quickly but not labouring over them.

Stage 2: A Role-card activity or pages 4-7? A choice!

There are two alternative ways forward:

a) The more active approach is to use the role-card activity which gives every student a role and tells them what mattered to them. You can find the cards and detailed ideas for the activity at: https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhatMattered.html

b) alternatively, use pages 4-7 as a case-study exploring what mattered to Margaret Paston.

Page 4 introduces Margaret and her letters and the use of inference to identify what her letters can tell us. Slide 7 shows one of Margaret's letters so students can see the 'real thing'. Margaret did not write her own letters - she dictated them to servants as did most women of her class though she was literate. Reading was essential for her in managing the family estates and for other purposes.

Pages 5-6 provide extracts from Margaret's letters. You could split these up around the class and collect feedback on slide 6.

Page 7 provides a summary of what mattered to Margaret. More information on the Pastons and their letters can be found at https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/PastonLetters.html

Whichever route you use it's important to return at the end of this section to students' preconceptions – is what they've learned so far what they expected or does anything surprise them? What new details do they want to add to their summary sheet (page 2)?

Having introduced these materials as alternatives you could, if you wish and have time use both. In addition there's a case study of what mattered to Geoffrey Luttrell on pages 18-21 (and slides 12-17) which is similar to that on Margaret. I originally included it in the body of the section but decided it was making the whole thing too lengthy so cut it out. If this had been a commercial book it would just have ended in the bin, but I've left it here at the end of the section, in case it's of use to anyone!

Stage 3: Pages 8-13, Building on stage 2!

These pages now build on the case-study or the role-play by summarising what mattered to each of the three groups in society identified back on page 2. The key activity here is to focus on building up those summaries on page 2, identifying a fuller list of what mattered to people. I haven't included lots of extra questions on pages 8-13 – it's better to leave it to you to decide what you want to ask students to do and whether you want to divide up the social groups around the class.

Page 8 – summarises what was important to wealthy people (such as Margaret Paston)

Pages 9-10 – covers what was important to the commons. As the importance of the harvest looms large here it's worth pointing out another activity on Thinking History 'Why was the harvest so important? at:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhyWasTheHarvestSoImportant.html

Pages 11-13 – what mattered to kings and queens. Page 11 acts as an introduction together with Slide 8. Rather than just provide summary text page 11 is a mini-activity – what can students infer from each 10 squares about what mattered to the individual monarch? Slide 8 provides answers to choose from if you want to provide more help for students.

By the end of this material students should have built up a strong summary of the kinds of things that mattered to each social group, perhaps on their copy of page 2.

Stage 4: Pages 14-15, The importance of religion

As religion and the fate of people's souls is central to what mattered to everyone I decided that this would be a good place to say a little about why religion mattered so much and how it affected some features of everyday life. These pages are a slight diversion from the main thread of the section but the importance of religion does arise naturally out of the previous pages. Slides 9-11 link to these pages.

Here I have included questions to make sure students see the links between this material and the overall thread of the section.

One activity on Thinking History that links closely to these pages is 'How can you spend less time in purgatory?' at:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/SpendLessTimeInPurgatory.html

Stage 5: Pages 16-17, Conclusions

There are two very different styles of conclusions to choose from – or maybe use both! Page 16 provides task to get students to think about what they've learned and take them back to the issues raised on pages 1-3. This page repeats the approach I took at the end of section 2 and will use at the end of other sections – a strong focus on metacognition.

Also included is reflection on the over-arching question set up in chapter 1 about how we perceive life in the Middle Ages and whether this material has changed or developed students' ideas about the Middle Ages. Thirdly there's the opportunity for students to reflect on whether this work has helped them think about what matters to them.

On page 17 I've set out some of the things I'd like to say to students. In textbooks authors rarely say anything personal – it's hard to hear the author's voice – but as this is a very personal project I think it's important that students know there's an individual behind the resources and who he is!

Finally

I hope this material will prompt teachers to think about how they approach teaching about the Middle Ages. The best way to do this seems to be to offer resources which show how an alternative approach can be taken. Therefore I'm not checking constantly for the numbers of downloads but

simply that teachers read this material and reflect on the value of building into questions such as ‘what mattered …?’ into their KS3 schemes.

Do feel free to adapt or change these pages if you wish, making them more suitable for your students. I haven’t attempted to write them at any particular level of reading demand – I’ve written them in the same way I’d talk to students. This means that there may be words and phrases that some consider ‘difficult’ such as medieval phrases (‘good worship’ ‘good lordship’, ‘the commons’) but many students enjoy the challenge of developing their language and vocabulary.