

Top 10 Myths about the Middle Ages: A Guide for Writers

By Threetails

*How do you know he's a king?
He's the only one who hasn't got sh-t all over him.*

-From "Monty Python and the Holy Grail"

When writing a story in a medieval setting, it's easy to get carried away by modern notions of what passes for "authentic." Many myths- some perpetrated by Hollywood and some caused by confusion with other centuries- have made their way into medieval-based fiction.

Popular myth has portrayed the Middle Ages as a filthy, backward, barbaric era when life was short and death was a relief. The caste structure was impenetrable, and unless you were nobility, life was pretty rotten.

But a closer look shows that a lot of our most cherished myths about medieval times are mostly just that: myth.

While writing my book "The Goldenlea" (coming some time in 2011), I did extensive research and what I learned was astonishing, to say the least.

1. There is only one "Medieval" period, and things didn't change much.

It's tempting to think of the Middle Ages as just one solid, unchanging chunk of history; the Roman Empire collapsed, some knights had a battle that lasted nearly a thousand years, and then they all put down their swords and grabbed paintbrushes when they got word that the Renaissance had started.

In reality, the Medieval period actually describes several distinct eras, each with their own cultural sensibilities, fashions, and social structures.

The Early Middle Ages, or Dark Ages, were the period from the 5th through the 10th century. This was basically when the Roman empire finally extinguished and the Catholic Church established a solid foothold in Europe. It was a period of serious instability, where land and property belonged to whoever could muster enough force to take it. Probably the most famous figure of this period was Charlemagne, the French king who conquered much of Europe and forged many of the provincial boundaries that stand to this day in France and Germany.

The High Middle Ages were a period of relative stability from the 11th through the 13th century. This period saw the shaping of modern Britain, the creation of the Magna Carta, and drastic improvements in engineering and metallurgy. Armor went from simple chain mail to incorporating solid plates, and castles went from wood to stone. It's also the period in which the social structure was most strictly enforced, with the King (presumably) at the top, his vassals in the middle, their knights just below, and the peasantry at the bottom. But this social order, known as the Feudal System, lasted nearly three centuries for the simple fact that for the time being, it actually worked rather well.

The late middle ages in the 14th and 15th centuries were probably the worst of it. A series of plagues, famines, and wars proved that the Feudal System was just too fragile to survive. Peasants rose up against their masters demanding better wages when the plagues created work shortages, and the entire order was thrown into chaos as the plague killed off people in droves, from the poorest to the wealthiest. In England and France, the Hundred Years War began. In the Catholic Church, schisms erupted that would soon lead to the rise of Protestantism.

It's important for writers creating a story in a medieval setting to define which of these eras their story will be set in, or which era it is most like, and do a great deal of research on that particular period.

2. Medieval justice was always rough

General consensus is that in the Middle Ages, the smallest of crimes would get you hanged.

In reality, it was much more complex than that, and many times the punishments were actually less severe than they are nowadays.

First, there was no such thing as long-term incarceration. Once you were charged and held for a crime, one of three things would happen. You would either be fined and released when your fine was paid, given some form of beating or other corporal punishment, or executed.

Of course, just which of the three punishments would be applied depended on the exact time period. In early Saxon Britain, nearly all offenses were settled with fines; by contrast, the Normans seemed preoccupied with the brutal business of trial by combat, which nearly always resulted in the death of the accused.

Generally speaking, however, capital punishment was most often reserved for things like stealing livestock, murder, and armed robbery. Your average petty criminal in the high middle ages could get away with either a fine or a good flogging (which, once the scabs healed, wasn't nearly as bad as 10 years in prison).

There were also means to avoid punishment altogether. Some communities gave offenders a head start to get out of town before coming after them, and the smart ones never came back. Sometimes, the accused could flee to a church or monastery and declare sanctuary, which would mean they could never leave the walls of the church again.

3. People were terrified of witches

It's a compelling image: entire communities on pins and needles over hapless and ugly old ladies who look at them the wrong way; innocents roasted alive on bonfires; torture and mayhem all around.

The only trouble is, that image belongs to a much later era, namely the 15th through 18th centuries.

For many centuries, the Medieval church actually dismissed the idea that Satan could have any power over true Christians, and thus witches and other fears were cast aside as pure superstition. Before about 1490, the number of executions for supposed witchcraft across Europe was barely appreciable, and more often than not it was a charge added to other charges to make them stick.

Only after the start of the reformation and Renaissance did charges of witchcraft begin to become commonplace. The Inquisition was a knee-jerk reaction to the church's failing grip on power, and many things that had been ignored in previous ages became serious issues.

Interestingly enough, the charge of sodomy follows a sort of parallel; at first it was frowned upon but not usually brought as a formal charge except to make other charges stick, but by the 16th and 17th centuries it had become a big deal.

4. Nobody Bathed In Those Days

You hear different stories about why people in the middle ages supposedly didn't bathe. Some say that modern concepts of hygiene were simply lost on the poor, ignorant people of the times. Others say that there was a widespread myth that bathing was actually bad for you.

In reality, neither is entirely true. The people of the Middle Ages probably didn't bathe as often as we do in modern times, but rest assured, they did bathe and they did value hygiene and grooming.

Soap was even available early on, although it was terribly time-consuming to make and expensive to buy. In fact, by the start of the Middle Ages, lye soap had already been around for nearly a millennium and many peasant farmers would have both the materials and the knowledge to make their own.

Certainly, modern conveniences like toilet paper, deodorant, and shampoo hadn't yet been invented, and as a result the accumulated smells of unwashed hair and bodies would become quite harsh after a while!

Most people who bathed did so in public bath houses, because for the average person, water use was at a premium. Only the wealthy could afford to bathe at home.

The supposed myth about bathing being harmful to one's health was actually more complicated than that. In the late middle ages, after outrage over the growth of prostitution and the general sight of nudity in public baths, writers of health manuals were pressured to encourage their readers to only wash the parts of the body visible to others such as the face and hands. It was a step backward in personal hygiene that would last well into the 18th century.

5. Firearms Didn't Exist

This myth stems more from an aesthetic choice by writers and directors than from any fact of history. There is a general belief that the roar of cannon and musket was reserved for much later eras and that it would be completely out of place in the middle ages. This is often reflected in medieval-inspired fantasy settings; tvtropes.org refers to it as “fantasy gun control.”

In reality, by the mid to late 14th century, both large cannons and hand cannons (sometimes called “handgonnes”) were in common use, and had begun to transform the battlefield. Many of the larger cannons fired a heavy arrow with a pitch-covered ball to seal the bore, known as a quarrel.

The reason the sword, lance, arrow, and pike remained common on the battlefield long after the invention of guns was a simple matter of convenience. The early guns were clumsy, difficult to set up,

prone to explode due to poor casting, and not very accurate. Only after about the 17th century did firearms begin to supplant traditional weaponry.

6. People were very prudish in the Middle Ages

There's a common myth that before the 20th century, people just didn't talk about sex, bodily functions, or anything nasty, and that crude humor and coarse language are something new that just magically sprang up in the wake of the 1960s.

When you look back through history, that's hardly the case. Medieval street theater was actually very bawdy, and extremely base; surviving “mystery plays” (plays involving Biblical stories) from the Middle Ages often feature jokes about flatulence and feces.

Indeed, most of the words we consider “profanity” nowadays entered the English language in the Middle Ages as Germanic slang. Part of the reason they were written off as “vulgar” was because of a tendency by the Normans to look down their noses at anything Saxon.

To this day, words with a latin base are considered more “polite” or “intellectual” than those with a Germanic base (you can say “feces” on daytime TV but not “shit.”). This is nothing more or less than the lasting legacy of the Norman Conquest more than 940 years after the fact.

The idea that people were somehow more restrained with their language back in the old days probably originated in the Victorian era, with its highly-sanitized versions of medieval stories. That sentiment became very popular during the massive cultural shifts of the 1960s and 70s.

And as for the actual sexual habits of medieval people? By all accounts, they were just as naughty back in those days as we are now, engaging in most of the same things. Prostitution was actually looked upon, in the early middle ages, as a necessary evil; St. Thomas Aquinas referred to it as “The sewer running beneath a castle.”

And what about homosexuality? The records are spotty; convictions were extremely rare and most of the activity was underground (though among the nobility there were a few “out” individuals, among them Richard I who, in his own words, confessed to “that particular sin” on numerous occasions).

Although little is known about the reputations of maritime professions for being a haven for homosexual behavior during the middle ages, there is one curious note from the Renaissance: Pope Paul IV allegedly wrote to Alonso, the 7th Duke of Medina Sidonia, to not tolerate sodomy on any of the ships of the Spanish Armada. Clearly, they had to be told!

Lesbianism, while looked down upon, was treated as if it didn't exist, and was almost never pursued as a serious charge.

These observations on just how little has changed about the more primal instincts of the human character leads to the next myth:

7. Knights and Monks were chaste and virtuous

Although they certainly were supposed to be, period accounts make no secret of the habits of

knights and monks.

As above, many highly-idealized versions of stories of valiant knights and their pure maidens began surfacing in the Victorian era, but these were often thoroughly-sanitized tales that bore little resemblance to the original stories (or the truth behind them).

In truth, the Chivalric code was slow in evolving, and generally taken to be more a loose set of suggestions than actual instructions to live by. Certainly, there was social pressure to live up to these ideals, but more often than not the base reality of medieval life won out.

It is also important to note that, particularly early on, knights were not limited to courtly love. If presented with a woman of lower class, it was explicitly written that they could take their pleasure at will, and marauding bands of rogue knights raping peasant women were certainly not unheard of.

Similarly, while monks were expected to maintain a high standard of conduct, many failed to live up to those standards. Some monasteries actually funded their orders by running prostitution rings, and there's every chance that some brothers of the order partook of their wares.

Then, of course, there is the fact that among the church and nobility, it was harder to bring charges against them. A knight or priest involved in sexual misconduct was unlikely to face charges unless it was an extremely high-profile scandal, and the church and aristocracy were very much aware of that fact.

8. Medieval medicine was crude, barbaric, and ineffective.

As with so many myths about the Middle Ages, there is an element of truth to this, but the reality is far more complex.

There certainly wasn't a great deal of knowledge as to how or why people got sick. Plagues were blamed on evil gases or miasma that rose from dead bodies and human waste. The ancient beliefs about the Four Humors dominated medical thinking. Remedies for illnesses ranged from moderately effective herbal cures, to entirely worthless folk remedies, and even harmful practices such as bloodletting.

And yet, if you were a knight who was severely wounded in battle, the chances were that you'd survive if it wasn't a head or deep chest injury. Medieval doctors, although ignorant of how infections worked, knew how to cauterize wounds and set broken bones.

If the state of medieval medicine could be summed up very briefly, it would be that they excelled in treating injury but lagged in treating chronic illness, in part because of a general ignorance of the cause of illness. By the end of the Medieval period, it would still be several centuries before the first practical microscopes would be available, and nearly 500 years before the first practical antibiotics would be manufactured. People did die of curable illnesses back then, and doctors did make mistakes, but they had little to work with in the way of practical knowledge.

For what it's worth, enough people survived in less-than-ideal conditions (and even lived well beyond age 50) that even the ill-informed medieval physician deserves some credit. Medieval medicine was inferior to that of Greece and Rome, but it was a major improvement from anything the Goths, Vandals, or Gauls may have had only a few centuries before.

9. Everyone's lot in life was set in the Middle Ages.

As with so many things, there is some truth to this, but the solid facts are a little more complicated. Time, place, and situation are all-important.

In the early medieval period, when warring chieftains vied for the then wide-open lands of Europe, anyone could rise from the rank of a simple farmer to become king of a large region of central or northern Europe if they were audacious enough. Dynasties like the Carolingians (the line that gave us Charlemagne) were forged in blood and fire, and the only law was brute force.

But by the high middle ages, things had settled down. There was a definite order, with the ruling monarch (theoretically) at the top, his noble lords, dukes, barons, and knights immediately below him, and each of these supported by droves of peasants. Yet even in this time, there was not always a fixed hierarchy.

For example, in England, a man born to a relatively poor family could become a man at arms—that is, a rank-and-file soldier for hire—and theoretically become not only rich, but eventually become a knight if he served well. Other nations considered knighthood the dominion of the nobility, a convention brought about by turmoil caused by rogue knights in the early middle ages, but even they had ways for a poor freeman to prosper, as a merchant or apprentice tradesman, for example.

The later middle ages found Europe with a labor shortage following the Black Death, and suddenly even the peasantry found they could demand higher wages and better living conditions. Many even rose beyond the realm of peasantry to become entrepreneurs. Of course, this new mobility so alarmed the upper classes that stricter laws were introduced; the result was class warfare that ushered in the tumultuous early days of the Renaissance.

Throughout the middle ages, there was at least one way to subvert the status quo entirely; Someone who didn't have a lot going for them in life could always join the church.

Life in the medieval church was very good; there was no shortage of donations of money and food to keep the monks fed and housed, monks were among the few who had a chance to learn how to read and write, and early in the Middle Ages, the clergy was even allowed to have wives and children so celibacy was not always an issue.

The monasteries also ran many very lucrative businesses (among them, grain milling and the wool trade). When Henry VIII broke up the Catholic church during the English Reformation, it was about more than just establishing protestantism as the new religion; it was about completely reordering the status quo. By King Henry's reign, the church had such a tight grip on the wool and milling trade that it made dealing in either business impossible without them; Henry VIII's aggressive campaign was about destroying a monopoly.

10. Science and discovery came to a standstill in the Middle Ages.

We like to think of the Middle Ages as the “dark ages,” a period in which learning, innovation, and discovery took a back seat for a few hundred years.

Indeed, much of the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome was lost during this time, and there

wasn't a great deal known about things like architecture, medicine, and chemistry. Hard facts and fanciful myths often shared the same pages in books about places like China and India, where few people were able to travel.

And yet, when one looks at the discoveries that did take place in the middle ages, it becomes clear that the state of human knowledge didn't stand still at all.

For much of the Middle Ages, the church was actually a patron of the sciences, for the simple reason that at the time, the church was confident that science couldn't disprove Biblical doctrine. It was only much later, as new discoveries began encroaching on cherished beliefs, that the clergy became worried.

Certainly, Roger Bacon raised a few eyebrows when he demonstrated for the brothers in his order that he could make rainbows by spitting water in front of a window, but his work with the spectrum was allowed and endorsed by the church.

Another aspect of medieval life that is largely overlooked is the fact that, for the first time in history, large-scale industrial machinery began appearing in Europe. It was generally powered by rivers, tides, or the wind and generally not as big or fast as the steam-powered machinery of the Industrial Revolution, but there was a concerted effort to automate things like grinding grain and producing paper.

These machines were quite often owned by the church, and may have been inspired by the surviving writings of Classical inventors such as the Greek mechanical genius Heron. Certainly, the development of gears and linkages was also due in no small part to the arrival of Muslim scholars in southern Europe in the early middle ages.

It is also worth noting that Marco Polo, one of Europe's first great explorers, worked mostly in the late 13th century, not during the Renaissance like Columbus, Pizarro, or Magellan.

Further Resources to Get Started With

If you're going to do a story set in the Middle Ages, by all means do as much research as possible and don't limit yourself. But as a good starting place (and to find out where I sourced much of the material mentioned here), I recommend a few very good sources:

Books

The Medieval Machine by Jean Gimpel

At times technically very dry, but very informative! It gives an in-depth look at the scale and scope of mechanical knowledge present in Medieval Europe, and discusses the roles of both the Catholic church and the Islamic conquest.

The Shaping of France by Isaac Asimov

An old book, but a very good primer on France (and by extension, Germany, Italy, England, and any number of neighboring countries) from the fall of Rome to the high middle ages.

Documentaries

Carl Sagan's Cosmos

Primarily about astronomy as a science, this classic documentary from 1980 has its share of brilliant insights into the state of science in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Terry Jones' Medieval Lives

An informative, entertaining, and at times surprising look into long-held stereotypes of the medieval period.

Conquest with Peter Woodward

There is an episode on the medieval knights that is worth watching.

Websites

Archive.org

www.archive.org

A website with information on practically everything. Text, audio, and video resources are abundant, and all free for download on this site.

English Heritage

www.english-heritage.org.uk

The modern-day custodians of such important medieval sites as the Tower of London and Dover Castle.

The Library of Congress

www.loc.gov

Primarily a resource on American history, but it's also a nexus of tens of millions of pages of online material and billions more pages of print material available on request.

The University of Washington Library: Primary sources for medieval history

<http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=72388&sid=535848>

A large collection of links and primary sources.