



## Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture I:  
Medieval Myths

### Outline:

*“The Middle Ages are a common and popular subject of representation in literature, film, and culture, but they are rarely done well. There are many ideas about what the Middle Ages were like that do not bear any resemblance to the actual time period...In this first lesson, I want to talk about some of these medieval myths and ways to correct some of those understandings so we can begin to get a better sense of what the Middle Ages actually were.”*

In this lecture, Dr. Junius Johnson discusses some of the challenges and myths associated with the Middle Ages, a rich historical period that might be better described as “the Age of Light.”

### The Problem of Dating the Middle Ages

- The concept of historical ages is a construct of historians, not a reflection of the consciousness of those living through them.
- Historians create narratives about the past. They organize events to form a cohesive story that makes sense of how the world moved from one state to another.
- New evidence should challenge and modify existing stories, but often it is forced to fit within the established narrative.
- With the Middle Ages, scholars have long abandoned a set of myths which continue to be disseminated in popular culture.

### The Middle Ages in Popular Culture

- Popular culture continues to misrepresent the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages”.



- Often the interpretations of this period are so false as to be pure fancy or nonsense.
- Medieval Europeans looked up to a dazzling and inspiring cosmos and a loving God who came near regularly to lift them up by his grace.

## Challenges in Identifying Eras

- The beginning and end of eras are determined by future historians and are not inherent truths about history.
- There are no clear rules for identifying when an era has definitively transitioned into something that is substantially different from what it was before.
- Two things ultimately defeat all attempts at a definitive division of history into eras:
  - the principle of continuity
  - the degree of difference between moments in a culture's life
- Cultures change by drift and the degree of difference between two moments looks larger or smaller from different distances.

## Theories for Dating the Middle Ages

- Different scholars propose various dates for the beginning of the Middle Ages based on the "fall of Rome," such as
  - 410 AD - King Alaric's sack of Rome
  - 476 AD - When Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustus
- This paradigm of dating the Middle Ages was popularized by the 18th century historian [Edward Gibbon](#).
- An alternate theory (favored by Dr. Junius) is the closing of Plutarch's Academy in 529 AD when Emperor Justinian forbade pagans from teaching. However, this theory is still largely based on symbolism.
- Medieval writers did not see themselves as living in a different era from the early church. For them, the incarnation of Christ was the decisive break.
- The end of the Middle Ages is similarly debated, with dates like 1453 (fall of Constantinople), 1492 (expulsion of the Moors from Spain and Columbus' exploration), and 1517 (Protestant Reformation) being proposed.
- The invention of movable type printing in Europe around 1440 is suggested as a key event marking the beginning of the Renaissance.
  - This event lays the groundwork for a culture of literacy and access to texts coming to fruition over the next several decades.



- However, other scholars want to date the end of the Middle Ages to 1300 so they can include Dante as a Renaissance humanist.

## Plurality of the Middle Ages

- The Middle Ages should be considered in the plural due to the vast temporal and locational differences within the period.
- It is normally broken up into early and late Middle Ages.
- The Renaissance did not arrive simultaneously across Europe, and regional variations were significant.
  - The Renaissance arrived in Italy as early as a century before England.
  - Hence the English Middle Ages are not really the same cultural phenomenon as the Italian Middle Ages.
- There are vast differences in how life was lived in different European countries around the same time period.
- When reading a medieval text, therefore, it's important to know the details of date and location.
  - One of the main goals of reading primary texts is to let it speak with its own voice.

## Debunking the Dark Ages Myth

- The term "Dark Ages" was invented by the Enlightenment to depict a period of cultural darkness before their own "enlightenment."
  - Based on the assumption that faith and superstition ruled and reason was suppressed by the Church.
  - This is fundamentally a derogatory and anti-ecclesial claim.
- "Middle Ages" is also a derogatory term, implying an intermediate period between the classical era and the Renaissance (the "rebirth" of the classical era).
- "Medieval" also just means "middle" in Latin. So there's no ideal moniker to describe this era.
- Dr. Johnson proposes the "Light Ages" to indicate that Medieval culture was vibrant and saw significant advancements in technology and art.

## Understanding the Middle Ages

- In many cases, both recent and historical, it is difficult to know the facts because they have been suppressed or are simply unavailable.
  - The availability of evidence tends to decrease as time passes.



- We can assume that even the manuscripts we have do not give the full picture because many others that were lost or destroyed.
- Also, such records may provide vital statistics but relatively little evidence of how life was normally lived.
- Material artifacts offer greater insight into daily lives but they are also studied out of context and are therefore incomplete.
- Stories have been passed down as oral tradition and their accuracy depends on the reliability of their transmission. Some are highly accurate, as attested to in this quote:

*“In the Parochial Survey of Ireland it is recorded how the story-tellers used to gather together of an evening, and if any had a different version from the others, they would all recite theirs and vote, and the man who had varied would have to abide by the verdict. In this way stories have been handed down with such accuracy, that the long tale of Deirdre was, in the earlier decades of this century, told almost word for word, as in the very ancient MSS. In the Royal Dublin Society. In one case only it varied, and then the MS was obviously wrong—a passage had been forgotten by the copyist.”* William Butler Yeats<sup>1</sup>

- Thus, our knowledge of the Middle Ages is limited with new evidence continuing to shape our perception of the period.

## The Beowulf Manuscript

- The Beowulf manuscript (one surviving copy) has an unknown history from the time it was copied in the 11th century until 1563.
- There is no information about whether it was read during this period.
- Robert Cotton's Collection (1563)
  - In 1563, the manuscript came into the possession of Robert Cotton.
  - This was likely a result of the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII, who used the wealth to gain support from nobles.
  - Cotton amassed a significant collection of medieval manuscripts.
  - The manuscript remained in Cotton's collection and was not publicly accessible.

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* (Pan Books: London, 1979), p. 4



- It was willed to the British nation in 1700 but still remained largely inaccessible.
- The manuscript was dramatically saved from the Ashburn fire at Westminster in 1731 and was relocated to the British Museum in 1753.
- Early Copies and Scholarship
  - In 1786, Danish scholar G.J. Thorkelin made the first copies of the manuscript and prepared it for publication.
  - He came to England seeking additional material on medieval Denmark and discovered the Beowulf manuscript.
  - Thorkelin made two copies and took them to Copenhagen, but they were destroyed in 1807 during Napoleon's bombardment.
- Thorkelin returned to England and finally published the text of Beowulf in 1815.
  - Beowulf remained obscure, primarily read by medieval historians and scholars of Anglo-Saxon.
- Revival by J.R.R. Tolkien (1936)
  - The manuscript finally gained significant attention after Tolkien's essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in 1936.
  - This essay brought Beowulf into broader academic and public consciousness.
- After almost 800 years of obscurity, Beowulf has become required reading for medieval studies and appears on many school reading lists.
- A century ago, it was largely unread, but now it is widely read in classical education.
- The importance of texts and figures in medieval theology and literature is continuously revised.
- The story of Beowulf's survival and eventual recognition highlights the dynamic nature of historical scholarship.

## Addressing Medieval Myths

- The myth that medieval life was nasty is unfounded; peasant life was comparable to that in the Roman Empire, and urban sanitation issues were not unique to the Middle Ages.
  - It's important to compare "apples to apples," i.e. French peasants to Italian farmers, or Parisian to Roman city dwellers.
  - Life in the Middle Ages did not get suddenly worse; rather, it began to get a lot better.
  - City life could be nasty in the Middle Ages but such was often the case in Rome.



- Sanitation and personal hygiene (bathing) were probably roughly equivalent.
- That people drank beer and wine in the Middle Ages to avoid polluted water is also a myth; the water was not polluted.
- Medieval life was not excessively violent compared to other periods (specifically, the 20th century) and travel was relatively safe.
- Life expectancy figures are skewed by high infant mortality rates; those who lived past infancy had a reasonable life expectancy (mid-fifties).
  - New evidence reveals that if someone lived to be 21 in the years 1200-1745, they would likely survive to 60-72 years of age.
- Medieval people were not ignorant as often portrayed:
  - They did not believe in a flat earth, as the earth was proven to be round from about 500 BC.
  - Belief that the earth is the center of the universe is not stupid—it was the most logical conclusion of the ground-based earth astronomy availability to them.
  - The church did not oppose Bible translations—literacy was more widespread than often believed.

*“Medieval people are frequently described in legal documents as being either literatus or illiteratus, and sciens or idota, (meaning literate, illiterate, knowledgeable, or uneducated respectively)--but it’s unclear whether these terms refer to the ability to read, the ability to read and write, the ability to read and/or write in Latin as well as the vernacular, or the ability to read and/or write in only the vernacular...For all these reasons, medieval literacy remains a particularly difficult issue to study.”<sup>2</sup>*

- With respect to the status of women, though they could not vote (along with the majority of people) they could own land, run businesses, and even hold titles independently.
- The popular myth of [\*Prima Nocta\*](#) is unfounded.

## Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> Clifford Backman (from *The Worlds of Medieval Europe*, p. 429)



- Future lessons will build a more accurate picture of the Middle Ages based on historical sources, challenging the prevalent myths and misconceptions.