

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF KING JOHN

**Historiography** is the study of why historians have different ideas about a subject. Historians' ideas are often affected by the beliefs and events of their own time. (**Context**)

Most medieval chroniclers thought John was an evil tyrant, but historians have changed their interpretations of him since then.



### MEDIEVAL MONKS

A lot of the myth of 'Bad King John' comes from the accounts of medieval monks. They were influenced to **prejudice and preconception**. They were churchmen who followed a set pattern (criteria) to evaluate a medieval king.

#### **A 'good' king:**

- ◆ **Provided protection for the church and its property.**
- ◆ **Submissive to papal authority.**
- ◆ **Was expected to lead a moral private life.**

**a)** John's conflict with the pope, excessive money collecting and poor moral character were bound to make these monks hostile to him.

**b)** John lacked official historians to gloss over his failings & mistakes (unlike the French Royal family – the Capetians - who sponsored historians to produce royal propaganda).

**c)** The chroniclers most influential in creating John's poor reputation are two 13th century writers at St Albans' Abbey – Roger of Wendover & Matthew Paris.

**d)** Though some 12th century historians praised Henry II's government – these two monks shared their old and rich monastery's conservative outlook, had an anti-royalist bias and supported the barons.

#### Roger of Wendover

**1)** He never met John but thought he was a tyrant.

**2)** Most of his work is probably based on gossip – some barons visited the abbey & told him stories he later used.

**3)** His work contains mistakes – he accuses John of having Geoffrey, archdeacon of Norwich, arrested for a trivial offence & then put to death in a horrible fashion – crushed inside a leaden cope. In fact, Geoffrey outlived John to become a bishop in 1225 (9 years after John died).

#### Matthew Paris

**1)** He was not even born when John became king & never met him.

**2)** He took over from Roger of Wendover as the chronicler at St Albans' Abbey in 1236 and copied Roger's opinions.

**3)** Matthew took the hostile descriptions even further. He claimed that even the infidels Emir of Cordoba would help him against his enemies. But even he was horrified by John's reputation – a tyrant, extortioner, sceptic in religion, a seducer of wives & daughters of his own barons, the murderer of his own wife's lovers.

**4)** John's personal morality was of great concern to these monks. But, in terms of sexual morals, John's court seems to have been quite normal for the Middle Ages. John had far fewer illegitimate children than Henry I (who is seen as a successful monarch). Of the scandals that link John with the wives and daughters of the barons only two are mentioned by contemporaries – one involves the wife of Eustace de Vesci & the other the daughter of Robert FitzWalter. It may be significant that these two were the bitterest of John's enemies and were at the centre of the conspiracy of 1212.

However, **not all the monks** writing at this time were as hostile – a monk from **Barnwell**, near Cambridge, writing between 1220 & 1230, tended to write objectively. Even when John fell out with the church, he says it was not all John's fault.

## TUDOR (1485-1603)

### **How did they see John?**

- 1) Tudor historians thought John was right to stand up to the pope.
- 2) They saw the pope as power-crazy, who wanted to control England. They blamed the pope for many of John's problems.
- 3) They also thought that the barons were wrong to rebel against John. They did not think that Magna Carta was a very significant document – Shakespeare didn't even mention it in his play "*The Life and Death of King John*"

### **Why?**

- ◆ People saw John as an earlier version of Henry VIII. Both kings quarrelled and stood up to the pope. Henry VIII had argued with the pope over his divorce to Catherine of Aragon & was excommunicated.
- ◆ Henry also feared attacks from France & Spain. In 1588 (during the reign of Elizabeth I), Philip of Spain (supported by the pope) sent the Armada to invade England and return the country to Catholicism.
- ◆ From 1536–1539, Henry closed down many monasteries & used their wealth.

## VICTORIAN (1837-1901)

### **How did they see John?**

- 1) Many Victorian historians saw John as a failure & villain. They thought he created his own problems & was cruel and wicked.
- 2) By the end of the century there was a division between **Whig historians** who regarded Magna Carta as of great importance, seeing the rebel barons as visionaries – rightfully putting King John in his place.
- 3) **Revisionists** studied the Charter in its medieval context – praised John for his support of effective central government. For them it was the barons blocking progress.

### **Why?**

- ◆ Victorian historians like **J R Green** ("Hell is spoiled by the fouler presence of King John") used medieval chroniclers to find out about John – Roger of Wendover & Matthew Paris were their main sources of information. It is not surprising that many adopted a very hostile view of John.
- ◆ Victorians disliked him because of his attitude to religion & the stories of his affairs. They judged John by their own moral standards. Many Victorians were regular churchgoers. Religion played a vital part in their lives. They liked their leaders to be good family men with high moral standards.
- ◆ Queen Victoria had ruled a large empire – brought great wealth to Britain. They admired past kings who had increased the size of the empire and who had been successful soldiers. John was not!
- ◆ During the Victorian period, the country became more democratic as more men gained the right to vote. The Whig historians regarded Magna Carta as the first step in this move towards democracy and saw John as trying to block this progress.
- ◆ On the other hand, the Victorian period also saw a more modern & efficient system of central government – the Revisionists saw that Henry II's reforms had been the start of this & so praised John for continuing what his father had begun. For them it was the rebel barons who were trying to turn the clock back to the supposed 'Good Old Days'.

## 1950s & 1960s

### **How did they see John?**

- 1) From 1950, some historians like **W L Warren** challenged the traditional interpretations of John. They were more sympathetic, saying he worked hard.
- 2) A few even claimed that he was an administrative genius, who ran the country as well as anyone could have done.
- 3) These historians also argued that John was unlucky – he was up against a powerful pope & skilful King of France who had more money than he did.
- 4) They also said he inherited problems from his father & brother ('Angevin despotism' & the unstable nature of the Angevin Empire)

### Why?

- ◆ During this period historians started to study the government records from John's reign in more detail. There are far more records from John's reign than from the reigns of any previous king. This meant that historians could find out far more about what the king's government did each day. Many praised his 'administrative kingship'.
- ◆ Historians started to say that the accounts by medieval monks were unreliable. They claimed that the chroniclers had created a myth, which was worthless & misleading.

### **1980s onwards**

- 1) Modern historians have mixed views about John (**Turner & Gillingham**).
- 2) Most accept that he did have some good qualities but that previous historians have made too much of his skills.
- 3) They agree that John faced many problems, but say that his actions made them a lot worse.
- 4) John had serious faults in his personality and that got him into trouble.
- 5) One of the main debates is over John's military skill – **Gillingham** argues that he was a very poor soldier whereas **Turner** sees him as a competent military planner, a cautious commander who understood medieval warfare and avoided pitched battles in favour of besieging the enemy's castles & plundering their resources.
- 6) Another debate is over the finances of John & Philip Augustus – who was richer? Was there inflation in 13th century England?
- 7) The basic question always is – how far was John to **blame** for the disasters of his reign?

### Why?

- ◆ Many claim that medieval government records give the impression that John was actually better than he was. Just because there are lots of records showing John hard at work does not necessarily mean he worked harder than previous monarchs. Rather, it was not until John's reign that detailed records were kept.
- ◆ He worked harder in England precisely because he was a failure. He had more time to get involved in running England because of his losses in 1204. As he was in England far more than Henry or Richard, blame focused on him!
- ◆ They argue that although monks were prejudiced against John, no one wrote anything that said John was a success. Clearly he did not possess the likeable qualities of his two predecessors that had won them popularity in spite of their arbitrary acts and financial burdens. Although subjects of Richard I and Henry II had suffered from royal anger or ill will, those 2 rulers could also display chivalric courtesy & a generosity of spirit missing in John. His disagreeable, even terrifying personality (including a streak of pettiness, meanness or spitefulness) impelled him towards tyrannical acts & there can be no doubt about his cruelty (even if exaggerated in chroniclers' tales).

- ◆ He wanted revenge & liked to humble his rivals – dangerous in a ruler who turned his spite against powerful & popular men. Since John could not win his barons' affection – he sought to rule them through fear & demanded their sons as hostages. Not surprisingly they were reluctant – especially with all the rumours that he had killed his own nephew Arthur. The killing of one's close kin (even if a dangerous political rival) outraged medieval aristocrats with their strong sense of family loyalty.
- ◆ Gillingham has compared John with Richard as a military leader and found him wanting. Turner has tried to put John into a wider context of medieval warfare – arguing in many ways it was Richard that was the exception.
- ◆ Studies of Philip Augustus have pointed out how much he had learned from his campaigns against Henry & Richard – John was facing Philip Augustus at his strongest.
- ◆ The financial debate has concentrated on a comparison of John and Philip Augustus' finances. The evidence is very sketchy (especially for the French finances) but the evidence points that there was no significant difference between the two (although Philip Augustus had far greater reserves). The idea that John suffered from the effects of inflation has also been challenged – studies of the Flanders' wool trade show that there was not the great influx of silver coin into England that was once believed. In fact, because John was hoarding so much silver currency, there was actually deflation at this time.
- ◆ Studies of the whole Angevin Empire suggest that it was in a very shaky position when John inherited it (especially after Richard's expensive campaigns), so it was almost inevitable that it would fall sooner rather than later. Gillingham disagrees – places the blame on John's poor showing as a soldier.
- ◆ Studies of the whole Angevin period, show that John was not a lot worse than his father or brother – he faced the consequences of the hostility to the 'Angevin despotism' which had been building up for some time. Others argue that John made a bad situation a lot worse – many that it was his failure on the battlefield that sealed his fate.
- ◆ Modern studies of Magna Carta suggest it was a combination of the selfish grievances of the barons & a genuine reform programme of the more moderate barons and Stephen Langton. They almost all agree that John had no intention of keeping to it.



**SOURCE A. Written by Matthew Paris, a monk from the monastery at St Albans near London.**

*John lost Normandy and many other lands because of his own laziness. He always took money from his people and destroyed their property. He hated his wife and she him. He gave orders that her lovers were to be throttled on her bed. John was jealous of many barons and seduced their daughters and sisters. He was a tyrant.*

**SOURCE B Written by Gervase, a monk from Canterbury, in Kent.**

*After arguing with the Pope, John ordered the few monks who remained at Canterbury, including the blind and crippled, out of the country. He said that all monks were public enemies. The whole of England was taxed heavily. He imprisoned many, bound them in irons and only released them in return for money.*

**SOURCE C Written by Roger of Wendover, a monk from the monastery at St. Albans.**

*The King's men dragged priests from their horses and robbed and beat them. The King's judges refused to help the priests. The servants of a sheriff on the Welsh borders came to the royal court with a prisoner who had robbed and murdered a priest. They asked the King what they should do with him. John said, 'He has killed an enemy of mine. Untie him and let him go.'*

*In 1209, a priest called Geoffrey said it was not safe for priests to work for the King any longer. John heard of this and Geoffrey was imprisoned in chains, clad in a cloak of lead and starved. Weakened and crushed, Geoffrey died an agonising death.*

**SOURCE D Written by a monk from Barnwell, near Cambridge.**

*John was a great ruler, but not a happy one. He experienced good and bad times. He stole from his own people. He trusted strangers, but not the people he ruled over. In the end, he was deserted by his own men. Few people mourned when he died.*

**SOURCE E: This picture was drawn by Matthew Paris a monk from the monastery at St Albans near London**



## **Background information on Sources A - E**

These sources were all written by monks. Nearly all sources from the Middle Ages were written by monks. Monks were part of the Catholic Church, so the Pope was their leader. King John was very unpopular with the Church because of his long quarrel with the Pope. As a result, most monks did not have anything good to say about John.

**Sources A and E** are by Matthew Paris. Matthew was not even born when John became king, and he never met John. He took over from Roger as the chronicler at St Albans Abbey in 1236 and copied Roger's opinions about John. Some of Matthew's stories are supported by documents, but his descriptions of John are often even further from the truth than Roger's. Matthew and Roger supported the barons against John partly because they hated any type of taxation.

**Source B** was written by Gervase, a monk at Canterbury Cathedral from 1163-1210. He was well informed about events because many travellers passed through Canterbury on their way to France. Gervase is usually uncritical of the people he writes about.

**Source C** was written by Roger of Wendover ten years after John's death. Roger was a monk at St Albans Abbey. He never met John, but thought John was a tyrant, who ruled his people unfairly and cruelly. Most of Roger's work is probably based on gossip. Many barons visited his abbey and told him stories, which he used in his chronicle. His work contains mistakes. Roger describes how John killed a priest called Geoffrey, but records show Geoffrey was alive ten years after John died! Roger also claims that John pardoned a prisoner who had murdered a priest, but records show that John ordered anyone who injured a churchman to be hanged from the nearest oak tree.

**Source D** was written by a monk from Barnwell, near Cambridge, probably between 1220 and 1230. The writer generally wrote about people and events objectively. This means that he did not allow his own personal feelings to influence what he was writing. Even when John fell out with the Church, he says that it was not all John's fault.