



A Medieval Mystery

Can you decode the dark secrets of this cartoon?

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Introduction

Tax records can tell us a great deal about life in the Middle Ages. They don't usually come with pictures but this one does.

It is a cartoon from 1233 during the reign of King Henry III. It's a detailed, complex cartoon and it is a bit of a mystery.

It was found on an Exchequer Roll, a kind of government document recording various payments that is stored rolled up. This roll listed tax payments made by Jewish people in the city of Norwich in Norfolk.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. Look at the cartoon and see if you can find:
 - a) A castle
 - b) Pitchforks
 - c) A set of scales
 - d) A woman
 - e) A crown
 - f) Devils
2. So far, what do you think the cartoon might be about?
3. Look at the left hand part of the cartoon image.
 - a) What is the man holding?
 - b) What do you think he could be weighing?
 - c) What does this man do?
 - d) What is behind him and why does it have a forked tongue?
4. Now look at the centre of the cartoon.
 - a) Who are the people shown here?
 - b) How has the cartoonist shown that the man and the woman are Jewish?
 - c) Can you work out the name of the demon? (Hint: Look at the letters on either side of him)
5. Look at the largest figure in the centre of the cartoon.
 - a) Who do you think he supposed to be?
 - b) Why does he have three faces?
 - c) He isn't a king so why is he wearing a crown?
 - d) Do you think he is standing in his own castle or is he in hell being tormented by demons? Why do you think that?
6. Now look at the right hand side of the cartoon.
 - a) What do you think these characters are supposed to be?
 - b) List what each of them is carrying.
 - c) What do you think their role is within the cartoon?
7. Have you unravelled the mystery behind the cartoon? What is your final conclusion on what the cartoon's message is?

Background

Persecution of the Jews

The terrible treatment of Jews by the Nazi Governments in the 1930s and 40s was not a new event. Though nothing had ever been seen on the scale of the appalling 'Final Solution' begun in 1942 in which 6 million were murdered, Jews have been the victims of mistreatment since Roman times, as their different religion and their success in business attracted hatred and jealousy. Laws were sometimes passed against them, such as the 1215 ruling by the Catholic Church that Jewish men had to wear spiked hats to identify them. At other times they have been made to wear stars on their clothing and change their names.

At the time this roll was written Jews in England were subjected to heavy taxes, had property stolen or confiscated and were sometimes attacked. The most serious attack on a Jewish community was the York Massacre in 1190 in which 150 Jews were killed as they took refuge in Clifford's Tower, one of the city's castles. The 12th century historian William of Newburgh accused the townspeople of an attempt at "sweeping away the whole race in their city".

Medieval Norwich

In the 13th century Norwich was one of the largest and most important towns in England. One of its richest and most powerful residents was Isaac fil Jurnet, a Jewish money lender who owned a large amount of property in the city and was a banker to the king. To some jealous citizens Isaac seemed like a sort of king himself.

Isaac employed other Jews to collect the money that borrowers in the city owed to him. The most well known (and most disliked) were Mosse Mokke and his wife Abigail.

This cartoon is an example of the feelings many people had towards Jews in medieval England. It is about real people and their situation within 13th century society.

Teachers Notes

This snapshot is suitable for KS3 History Unit 19: 'How and why did the Holocaust happen?' and could also be used to support Citizenship at KS3 Unit 4: 'Britain - a diverse society?'.

The cartoon depicts the profoundly negative way in which Jews were viewed in 13th century England. Their situation did not improve. In 1290 King Edward I expelled every Jew from England, the first time this had happened anywhere in Europe. Thousands of men, women and children were forced to leave for the Continent and Jews were not officially allowed to live in Britain again until 1655.

There are three main figures in the cartoon that we can identify:

Isaac fil Jurnet

Isaac fil Jurnet was one of the richest Jews in England and certainly the richest Jew in Norwich where he and his family had lived for a number of generations. Isaac was much richer than many Christians living at the same time. Like many Jews, Isaac was a money-lender. Christians were forbidden from lending money at interest to make a profit but Jews were allowed to do this, though they were banned from most other professions.

Isaac was the chief money-lender to the Abbot and monks of Westminster. He took them to court to get interest on the money they had borrowed. As a result of this he became the target of opposition from Pandulf, the Bishop of Norwich, who wanted to see all Jews thrown out of the country to 'beyond the seas'. Isaac was also a merchant and owned a dock in Norwich. The Abbot and monks were not the only ones in debt - whole districts of the city owed him money.

Mosse Mokke

Mosse Mokke worked for Isaac, collecting the money owed to him. Money in medieval England was made from precious metals, and was worth as much as it weighed. This caused problems because people would 'clip' pieces off the edge of coins and use these pieces to make another coin. The coins that had been clipped were hard to detect and were used to pay for goods despite being worth less than they appeared. Many people were tempted to clip coins but it was a crime - punishable by death. However, Mosse Mokke was a rather shady character. He had been charged for beating someone up in 1230 and in 1242 he was caught clipping coins and was executed.

Abigail

Another well known figure in medieval Norwich was Abigail, or Avegay, who some said was the wife of Mosse Mokke. She was known for usury - the collecting of very high interest on a loan. Jewish women were much more likely to run businesses than Christian women and could become quite rich.

The images in this snapshot are taken from document E 401/1565 at the National Archives.

Extension work for this lesson might include getting the class to draw their own cartoon to comment on a current issue.

Sources

Medieval Map : E 146/25 f.222

Modern Map : Ordnance Survey

Schemes of Work

What was it like to live here in the past?

Key Stage 1-2 Unit 18

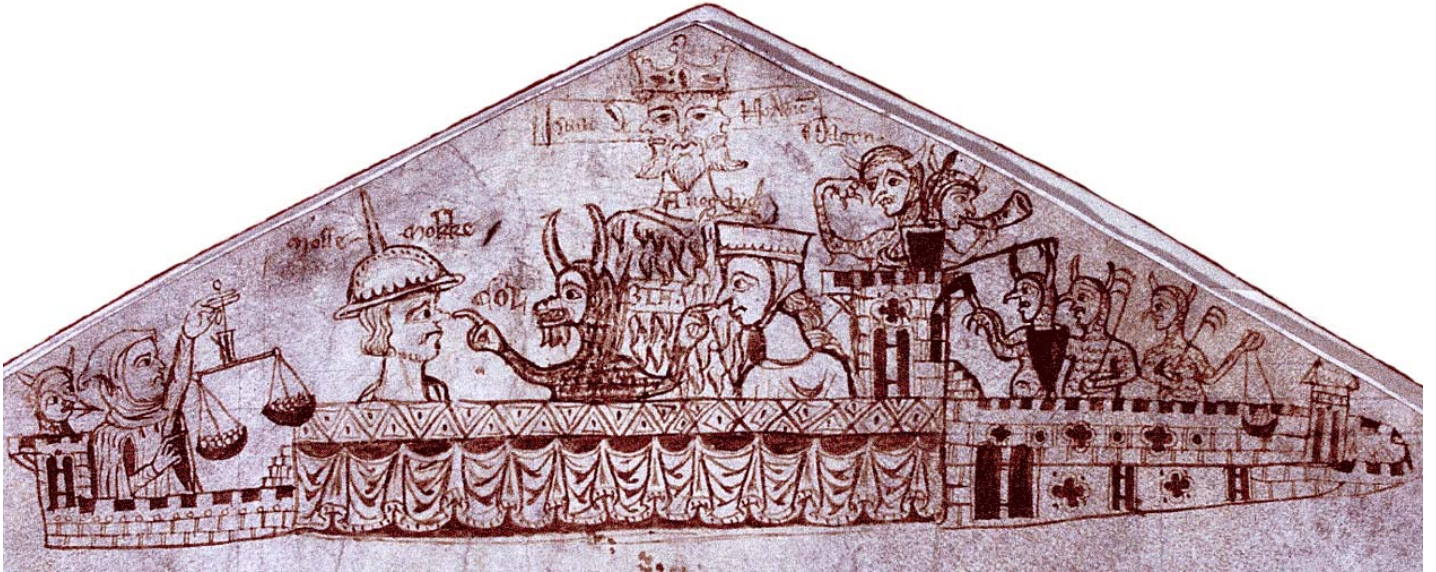
How hard was life for medieval people in town and country?

Key Stage 3 Unit 3

How did the medieval church affect people's lives?

Key Stage 3 Unit 4

Source 1 : A Medieval Cartoon (E 401/1565)



Source 1 : Close up Left Hand Side



Source 1 : Close up Centre



Source 1 : Close up of large figure



Source 1 : Close up Right Hand Side

