

History

Lesson 3 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Medieval Lives in Material Culture

Enquiry: Which sources reveal the most about medieval peasants?

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What is the study of material culture?

Studying material culture means examining the objects and buildings of a particular society. Historians of material culture are not just interested in what the objects are, but also in other puzzles like how they were used, how much they were worth to their owners, how their owners thought about them.

Studying the material culture of the medieval period often requires a lot of **archaeology**. This is because a lot of the objects and buildings from hundreds of years ago are now lost underground, meaning that skilled archaeologists are required to dig up and examine the material culture.

Material culture can help us learn about those who could rarely read or write; in our case, the ordinary lives of medieval peasants.



What can Wharram Percy reveal about medieval lives?

Wharram Percy was a medieval village in Yorkshire. Although it has been deserted since the sixteenth century, it appears to have contained human settlement for many thousands of years. It is mentioned in Domesday Book, and appears to be a typical medieval village.

Discoveries from archaeological **excavations** have revealed a vast amount of objects owned by the villagers. These included leather shoes, metal cups, ceramic vases, board games made from animal bones and teeth. While many items were functional, like horseshoes, ploughs, tools, and locks, others were decorative. This suggests that peasants took pride in their life outside of work, choosing to demonstrate the little wealth that they had.



Investigating religious belief through material culture

Material culture also provides an excellent insight into the religious beliefs of peasants. Churches, which were very common in villages and towns, often contained lavish decoration and ornate objects. Peasants would have wanted the churches to demonstrate their devotion to God.

Churches were also decorated with **doom paintings**. These were large, vivid portrayals of heaven and hell, drawn in great detail on the walls.

Peasants were rarely able to read, and therefore the Church used these paintings to teach peasants to fear hell, and follow the Church. We can tell these paintings must have been successful, because peasants also commonly collected **pilgrim badges**; little souvenirs from their visits to holy sites.



How might material culture *not* reveal medieval lives?

Material culture has some limitations. Some objects simply cannot survive hundreds of years. Those objects that do survive might be quite rare. When an object is rare, it can be difficult to know *exactly* what it is, and how it was used; they do not come with a written instruction manual!

Furthermore, it can be difficult to work out why objects were made and how they were used. Historians of material culture often need to check other sources to see how objects were used; simply holding the object in your hand might not be enough to know why it had been made, owned, or valued by a medieval peasant.



Glossary

Archaeology: recovering material culture, often from the ground

Doom painting: a large, often scary painting of heaven and hell, found on the walls of medieval churches.

Excavation: a carefully organised and conducted dig of an historic site

Pilgrim badge: a small souvenir, usually made from metal, sold to those pilgrims who visited holy shrines and churches. Commonly owned by peasants.



Comprehension Questions

1. Why do historians of material culture often need to use archaeological methods to investigate medieval lives?
2. Why is it important that decorative *and* functional objects were found at Wharram Percy?
3. What can doom paintings and pilgrim badges reveal about religious belief among medieval peasants?
4. What difficulties can be found when investigating material culture?

