

The National Archives
Education Service

A Medieval Mystery

Can you decode the
dark secrets of the
cartoon?

13th Century Roll,
1233. (E401/1565)

Introduction

Lesson at a Glance

Suitable For: KS3

Time Period:

Medieval 1066-1485

Curriculum Link:

The development of Church, state and society in Medieval Britain

- Christendom, the importance of religion and the Crusades
- Society, economy and culture: religion in daily life

Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day.

- The Holocaust (as historical context)

Learning Objective:

To closely examine a document to discover its true meaning.

To evaluate the thought behind Medieval graffiti.

Resources needed:

Printed sources

The Exchequer Roll

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.

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Useful links:

Moving Here

(<http://www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/jewish/origins/origins.htm>)

The Moving Here website explores the history of British migration, including the history of Britain's Jewish communities from the Medieval period to the present day using items from the collections of a diverse range of UK museums, galleries and archives

Medieval Source Book – Roger of Hovedon

(<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/hoveden1189b.html>)

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook has a large number of documents relating to Jewish life in Medieval Europe. This is an extract from the Chronicle of Roger of Hovedon describing violence towards Jews in London a few months before the York Massacre of 1190.

Teacher's notes

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 a number of 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.

Isaac is pictured with a triple beard to associate him with the devil and suggest sexual excess. Demons were often linked to the seduction of women, so again this is a very negative portrayal of a Jew.

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 Devils

In the cartoon we can see a devil named Colbif (centre) and another called Dagon (to the right of Isaac). Colbif is shown pointing to the hooked noses of Abigail and Moses as if to liken them to himself, so the cartoon is providing a visual shorthand associating demons with Jews. Even the devils' fingers are drawn to look like hooked noses to re-enforce the idea. The characters are portrayed in profile to emphasise this. All of the devils are shown with horns in order to link them with animals. Again, by showing the devils as part man and part beast, the cartoonist is associating the Jews with sin; they are not made in God's image. The semi-nakedness of the devils is also used to suggest barbarity.

Finally, there is a reference to a devil named Mammon. Mammon is mentioned in the Bible in the gospels of Matthew and Luke and is associated with greed, the name comes from the ancient Aramaic word for riches. Aramaic is one of the Semitic languages, which also includes Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, and ancient Babylonian and Assyrian.

The Big Picture



Look at the drawing and see if you can find:

- A castle
- Pitchforks
- A set of scales
- A woman
- A crown
- Devils

So far, what do you think the cartoon might be about?

Adding Context

Now read the Background information below. Does this give you a better idea of the meaning of the cartoon?

Persecution of the Jews

The terrible treatment of Jews by the Nazi Government in the 1930s and 1940s 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 or 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

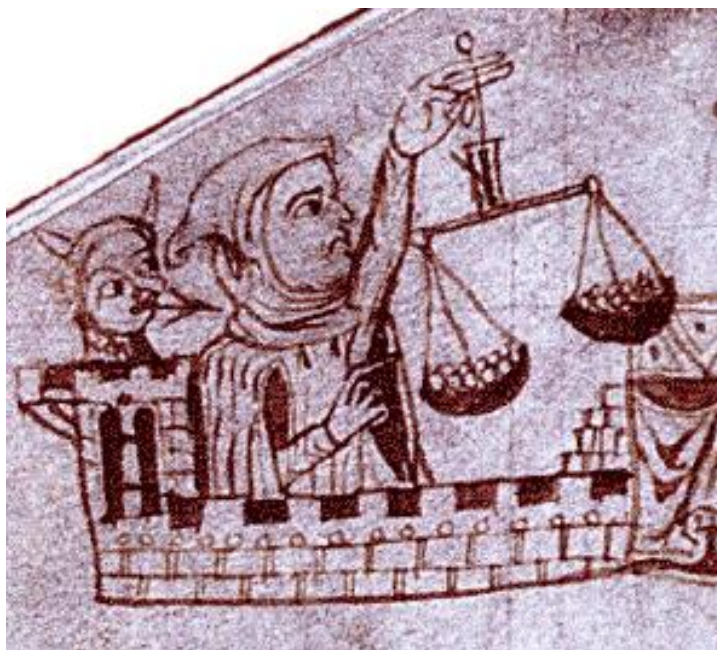
In the 13th century, Norwich was one of the largest and most important towns in England. One of its richest and most powerful residents was Isaac fil Jurnet, a Jewish money lender who owned a large amount of property in the city and was a banker to the king. To some jealous citizens Isaac seemed like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

What do you think the cartoon might be about?

Looking Closer

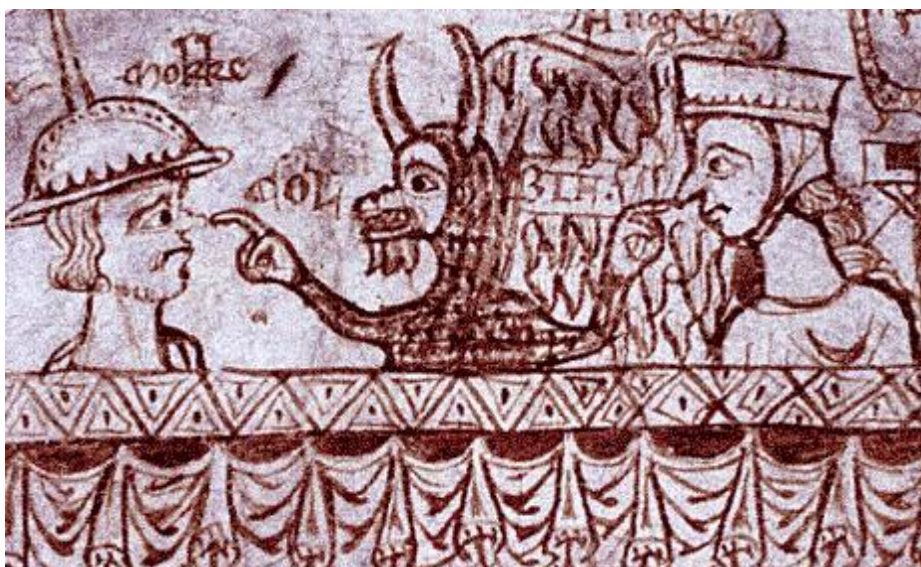


Look at the left hand part of the cartoon image

1. What is the man holding?
2. What do you think he could be weighing?
3. What does this man do?
4. What is behind him and why does it have a forked tongue?

Now look at the centre part of the cartoon.

1. Who are the people shown here?
2. How has the cartoonist shown that the man and the woman are Jewish?



3. Can you work out the name of the demon? (Hint: Look at the letters on either side of him)

Looking Closer



Look at the largest figure in the centre of the cartoon.

1. Who do you think he is supposed to be?
2. Why does he have three faces?
3. He isn't a king so why is he wearing a crown?
4. Do you think he is standing in his own castle or is he in hell being tormented by demons? Why do you think that?

Now look at the right hand side of the cartoon.

1. What do you think these characters are supposed to be?
2. Annotate the picture naming each item they are carrying
3. What do you think their role is within the cartoon?



Have you unravelled the mystery behind the cartoon? What is your final conclusion on what the cartoon's message is?