

History

Enquiry: What can we learn about the medieval world from the Book of Margery Kempe?

The Book of Margery Kempe

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What is social history?

The study of history is more than the study of kings and queens. It is also the study of how everyday people lived and worked, what they believed and how they felt. This sort of history is harder to study because often the only **historical sources** to survive are about the most powerful people in the country. So, we have lots of sources about kings, their families and leaders of the Church from the Middle Ages. However, sometimes historians who want to study **social history** are lucky and find diaries or **biographies**. This is exactly what happened in 1934 when someone found a 500 year old copy of the Book of Margery Kempe.



What is so special about the Book?

When Margery Kempe was alive, she was famous across England. People talked about her all the time, sometimes very rudely, sometimes with great respect. Then for many centuries, she was forgotten. The only reason we are able to talk about her now is because her book was found by accident when someone was clearing out a cupboard!



Margery's book is special for a number of reasons. It is the first **autobiography** to be written in English. Normally the only things that were written 600 years ago were in Latin, the language of the Church. These sources are almost all about big events or government business. But Kempe's autobiography is about the life of a medieval woman. When Margery lived, women were usually expected to keep quiet and have babies, definitely not write books and cause trouble the way Margery did!



The reason the book is so useful to historians is that it tells us stories that could easily have been forgotten. These stories give us ideas about how people in the Middle Ages lived and how they saw the world. So, the book allows us to get a better idea about the lives of medieval people, in a way that other surviving historical evidence from that time does not.



How do we know we can trust the Book as a source?

Before historians start using a source, they must be careful to check it is not a **forgery**. Sometimes people make up stories and pretend they were written much earlier. Luckily, historians generally agree that we can trust that Margery Kempe's autobiography is not a forgery and was written in the Middle Ages. There are several reasons why.



Margery met a lot of important people when she was alive. We know many of these were real people who lived at the time she lived. Her father, for example, was a very important man in the town of Lynn in Norfolk, and he is mentioned in many other sources. She herself is mentioned in an important document in 1438, just before she died. Margery travelled thousands of miles away from home, to Rome, Jerusalem, Norway and Spain. The way Margery describes these places is similar to descriptions historians have studied in other medieval sources. She also mentions events that actually took place, for example when King Henry IV went to war with France. The Book is also similar to other books written in medieval Europe, which means historians can check them for similarities and differences.



Glossary

A historical source: Something that survives to the present day that historians use to find evidence.

Social history: A type of history that focuses on understanding how people lived in the past.

Biography: A book about a person's life.

Autobiography: A book about a person's life, written by that person.

Forgery: A fake document.



Comprehension Questions

1. What is a historical source?
2. What is the difference between a biography and an autobiography?
3. What is so special about the Book of Margery Kempe?
4. Why do historians think it is a trustworthy historical source?
5. Why is studying social history important?

