

Getting Virtually Medieval

Anu Lahtinen

Medieval researchers may well be happy because of the audiovisual publicity of the Middle Ages, even though this publicity is not first and foremost focused on academic studies as such. In these times in which the old slogan "publish or perish" has been more and more turned into "attract publicity or perish", it is important for a scholarly field to attract even some media interest.

For the many friends of popular and adapted history, the Middle Ages is the most vital source for inspiration, open for fantasies of wonderful banquets, sword fights, colorful market places, sorcery, digital adventures and the like. This can be seen, for example, in the numerous fantasy stories – one of the most popular of which is the Lord of the Rings – a life-long creation based on the expertise of a medievalist, Professor J. R. R. Tolkien (cf. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ring/index.htm>).

I do not wish to (excessively) ridicule the popular interest in the Middle Ages, nor do I want to suggest that amateurs would always be less accurate in their knowledge than the scholars. For instance, the members of the medievalist Society for Creative Anachronism (<http://www.sca.org/>), itself an interesting mixture of "authenticities" and "creative anachronisms", vividly discuss about what kind of clothes, items, words and values can be labeled as "period" – that is, typical of the medieval period. Even scholars may well enter into these imagined ages, or they may point out their faults, or at least analyse them as present trends of popular culture.

For many consumers of historical entertainment, however, the Middle Ages is parallel to "a very long time ago, when things were different from the present". The Middle Ages, then, provides a world for fantasies and fears, a distant mirror for our modern times, seemingly reflecting anything we happen to hope or fear: Technicolor knights, emancipated Druidesses, witch hunts (sic!) and the recent King "of the Brass Knuckles" Arthur. In the words of Kathleen Davis, medievalists following political discussions and their notions of the "Dark Middle Ages" are certainly "unsurprised by this commonplace [...] association of the Middle Ages with anything labeled inhumane".

These popular images are both a blessing and a curse for scholars. Blessing, because they bring publicity even to medieval studies and offer some context in which the Middle Ages may be presented or commented on to a wide audience. Curse, because a scholar may be willing to get rid of the very notion of there being anything as "the Middle Ages"; however, academic experts are often expected to either praise or condemn the bright and strong colors and sharp contrasts of the popular Middle Ages.

It goes without saying that the bright and strong colors are the prevailing ones in the popular images. A historian may only wish to make some small comments in the margins of the popular Middle Ages. How, then, should we see the role of a medievalist? Should one become a superhero of historical truth, smashing down the dragons of the "wrong" information about the Middle Ages? Or would it be better to withdraw to the peace of a desert cave, as a hermit, to get totally rid of popular images, strange stereotypes and conservative periodizations (after all, who believes in the Old, Middle, and New Ages nowadays)? Or should one become a Wizard Guide of the Middle Ages, guiding tourists from tournaments to the golden courts, as in the fantasy novel *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* by Diane Wynne Jones? (<http://www.leemac.freemove.co.uk/toughdark.htm#dark>).

These questions were among those asked in the symposium *Virtually Medieval?*, held in Turku 10–11 December 2004 at the University of Turku. The focus was on IT-technology and its potential when it comes to medieval studies or informing about or visualising scientific results. The aim of the seminar was to discuss the possibilities of the new technology as well as the limits and the meaningfulness of the applications available. The symposium, which gathered experts from many different fields, was organised by *Mirator* and The Association of the Finnish Medievalists, Glossa.

There is no way of denying that the popular images of the Middle Ages are very much present in the digital media, be it computer games, movies, cartoons, role playing games, etc. Never mind if they are "really" medieval or not, they are associated with the medieval times. This power of "something like medieval" in the popular culture raises hopes, of course, that even scholarly research results might be commercialised. If a commercial computer game with "medieval" elements is a success, then why not make some money with academic multi media presentations, following the same logic?

Perhaps – and perhaps not. Experts in the Middle Ages are rarely experts in technology, as little as technological experts are rarely experts in

the Middle Ages. Both should be combined, and even then there are logical conflicts in combining technologies of commercialisation and education. The objective of scholars and teachers is knowledge – whether it is thought to be certain or uncertain, objective or subjective. The objective of commercial entertainment, on the other hand, is profit. With an objective of knowledge, it is not easy to bend into spicy commercial images. And even in the case where a medievalist participates in commercial projects, historical – not technological – expertise is his or her trump card. As some of the participants of the symposium pointed out, there is no use in a researcher's trying to invent the game console again.

Instead and besides of coping with commercial images of the Middle Ages, the participants of the symposium could prove that there were other ways of benefiting from the new technologies – such as electronic databases, cd-rom publications etc.

A 3D measuring device may observe the topos of certain pieces of clay, then producing a picture of the original vessel. It is possible to use various databases and programs in creating models of analysis, or finding connections which would earlier have taken decades to decipher. Medieval art and documents may be analysed without expensive travelling, too, if they can be represented in a cd-rom format.

These solutions facilitate scholars' work in archives and museums. However, by definition, technology does not create better research. Nor is it the philosopher's stone automatically producing lovely popular presentations of the Middle Ages. Thanks to technology, however, scholars may overcome some technical problems and focus on the contents and the process of analysis.

Technology may even produce results which may result into popular experiences and multimedia results which could not have been possible without the expertise of medievalists. Examples of this kind of products were also presented in the symposium. Now these examples are brought to our colleagues and other interested in this Special Issue of *Mirator*, based on the presentations of the seminar *Virtually Medieval?*. I would like to thank all the participants and authors for their interest and commitment in the process of getting virtually medieval.

Anu Lahtinen

Chair person of Glossa, Association for Medieval Studies

M.A., European Doctorate, Researcher

Department of History, University of Turku, Finland

email: anulah @ utu.fi