**MYTHBUSTERS:**

**Misconceptions of the Middle Ages**

**1. Medieval people thought the earth was flat**

Virtually every medieval scholar believed the world was round. However, in the 19th century it was widely reported that people in the Middle Ages thought the earth was flat, because it made for a good example of how backward the period was believed to be.

**2. There were elaborate torture devices in the Middle Ages**

There are many different gruesome torture devices that supposedly existed at this time – for example the Iron Maiden, the guillotine, and the Breast Ripper. However, while many are said to be ‘medieval torture devices’, they were actually invented centuries later.

**3. People did not live past 30 years old in the Middle Ages**

It has long been stated the life-expectancy for a medieval person was about 30 years old. This does not mean that a person was considered old or about to die when they turned 30. Women, unless nobility, usually married around their mid 20s. If a medieval person survived to adulthood, he would likely live into his 60s or 70s, and they would not be considered to be old until at least the age of 50. Life-expectancy rates were lower in the Middle Ages because there was a much greater chance that an infant or child would die because of illness or disease than in modern times.

And yes, a lot of Medieval medicine was based on what we would consider today mystical bunk. A great deal of diagnosis involved astrology and humoral theory. Blood letting was a respected method of treatment, and many of the curatives were not only useless — they were downright dangerous. And while there were medical colleges, extraordinarily few physicians were able to attend. Still, some aspects of Medieval medicine were logical even by modern standards. Wrapping smallpox in scarlet cloth, treating gout with colchicum, using camomile oil for an earache — these were all effective treatments. John of Arderne employed anesthetics in his practice, and many surgeons were skilled in couching cataracts, sewing abscesses, and setting bones.

**4. Medieval people were always dirty and had terrible personal hygiene**

People in the Middle Ages did take baths, and would try to keep clean. Combs and other personal grooming devices were also widely used. Members of polite society, from kings to villeins, followed certain etiquette, and that etiquette involved good table manners. In fact, depending on when and where and with whom you were eating, you might have to follow very strict procedures for eating and drinking. Here's a tip: If a lord passes you his cup at the dinner table, it's a sign of his favor. Accept it, backwash and all, and pass it back to him after you've had a sip.

**5. Medieval women had no rights**

Women in the Middle Ages could inherit, buy and sell property, run a business, and had many legal rights (in fact some of these rights would diminish in the Early Modern Period). The idea that they were virtual slaves to their husbands is also false. In England, a widow could take up the trade of her dead husband — and Mortimer specifically cites tailor, armorer, and merchant as trades open to widows. Some female merchants were actually quite successful, managing international trading ventures with impressive capital. Women engaged in criminal activity as well, including banditry. Many criminal gangs in Medieval England consisted of families, including wives with their husbands and sisters with their brothers.

#### 6. People distrusted all forms of magic and witches were frequently burned.

#### During the 900s, the Catholic Church wasn't interested in trying witches for heresy; it was more interested in eradicating heretical superstitions about "night-flying creatures." And in 14th-century England, you might consult a magician or a witch for some minor "magical" task, such as finding a lost object. In Medieval England, at least, magic without any heretical components was tolerated. Eventually, the late 15th century would give rise to the Spanish Inquisition, and we do see witches hunted down. Witch burnings weren't unheard of in the Middle Ages, but they weren't common, either.