



# Using Popular Culture to Intrigue Your Students

**Exploring the history behind the façade of television, movies and other forms of pop culture.**

*Jem Duducu and Greg Chapman, History podcasters*

One of the biggest issues involved in keeping history students engaged is making things relevant or, dare we say it, cool. A history teacher today has resources like no generation before, with access to a wealth of YouTube videos, podcasts, Virtual Reality and beyond. Yet many teachers still find it difficult to engage some students in history, because no matter how much modern technology is used, some students seem to think the subject is stuck in the past.

One way to address this is to find links between obscure tales from history and popular culture that help your students find relevance in the past. In this article we link three obscure historical facts to popular culture to help history students see that history is alive all around us.

## **Hobbits: Out of the Book and into the Cave**

Tolkien's classic 1937 novel *The Hobbit* opens with:

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.

Hobbits are of course fictional but an amazing

discovery in Liang Bua cave on Indonesia's Flores Island in 2003 shifted the boundary between human and hobbit, between fantasy and fact. It was here that fossils of a new Homo genus were found. Scientists called it Homo Floresiensis, but it was quickly nicknamed The Hobbit.<sup>1</sup> The hominin stood just over a metre high – about the height of a Hobbit. They also seemed to live in caves, like a hobbit, and they were even intellectually sophisticated enough to use stone tools.<sup>2</sup> However there the similarities end, as clearly the caves they lived in were not some kind of subterranean rural English cottages, nor was there any evidence of clothing, wizards, or magical rings.

This discovery opened up a whole new branch of the hominin tree – hominins are human-like individuals who would have lived at the same time as both Homo Sapiens and the last Neanderthals. Not much is known about this type of proto-human and the remains of only nine individuals have so far been found. However Homo Floresiensis has rewritten archaeological textbooks, as they lived in South East Asia from around 94,000 to 13,000 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

It is wonderful to be able to link a made-up and fantastical creature with a real part of our evolutionary story.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The 'Hobbit cave' in Indonesia. (Photograph by Rosino, used under CC BY-SA 2.0)

RIGHT: Mace head depicting the Egyptian 'Scorpion King.' (Photography by Ivy Close Images/Alamy)



### Scorpion Kings: Silver Screen Bad Guy and Egyptian King

The Scorpion King is best-known as a baddie played by 'The Rock' (Dwayne Johnson) in *The Mummy* franchise of films (1998–2008) and the spin-off *Scorpion King* series (2002–18, but let's not go there). But there is genuine evidence of at least one real pre-dynastic Egyptian monarch, maybe even two, known as the Scorpion King. The monarch used the scorpion as a symbol of his rule which is why historians know him as the Scorpion King.<sup>4</sup>

This Egyptian monarch predates the pharaohs, placing him truly at the very edges of history. It's also worth knowing that although 'pharaoh' and 'king' are generally interchangeable titles, 'pharaoh' literally means 'great house or hall.' It implies that the monarch is so mighty you cannot name him but have to refer to his abode instead.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the first pharaohs might have had multiple names. This means that the 'Scorpion King' and one of the first Pharaohs, Narmer, could in fact be the same person. Indeed a mace head in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum shows the Scorpion King in a very similar way to other depictions of Narmer. He wears the 'white crown' which shows he ruled the Upper Nile region. Later

pharaohs have headgear with both a serpent and a vulture head, which shows that they ruled both the Upper and Lower Nile regions.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever he was called (personally I like the sound of Scorpion King more than just Narmer, don't you?), this king ruled at a time when trade and agriculture were starting to bind Egyptian society into a larger entity that would be the foundation of the Egyptian dynasties for millennia to come. It is also the time where the first writing appears, which means we can set the period to around 3,200–3,000 BCE.<sup>7</sup> He is therefore an important and formative figure and it is frustrating that so little evidence exists.

The Scorpion King is a hot topic of debate amongst Egyptologists, with many theories and counter-arguments swirling around these ancient artefacts. More than 5,000 years later, we are still arguing over his legacy. I doubt the movie Scorpion King will be famous for so long ...

- 1 Carl Zimmer, 'Are Hobbits Real?', *New York Times*, 20 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/insider/are-hobbits-real.html>.
- 2 Zimmer, 'Hobbits.'
- 3 Thomas Sutinka et al., 'Revised Stratigraphy and Chronology for *Homo floresiensis* at Liang Bua in Indonesia,' letter, *Nature*, 21 April 2016, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature17179>.
- 4 Natalia Klimczak, 'Searching for the Lost Footsteps of the Scorpion Kings,' Ancient-Origins.net, 27 February 2017, <http://www.ancient-origins.net/history-famous-people/searching-lost-footsteps-scorpion-kings-007598>.
- 5 Jaromir Malek et al., 'Pharaoh,' *The Sphinx Nose*, <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/9pharaoh.html>.
- 6 Thomas H. Maugh II, 'The Real Scorpion King,' *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 2002, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/15/science/sci-scorpion15>.
- 7 Klimczak, 'Searching for the Lost Footsteps.'



LEFT: Although these television Vikings don't wear horned helmets, they probably don't look much like real Vikings either. (Photograph by Bernard Walsh)

### Vikings: TV Hit and Medieval Menace

Read this entry from Britain's medieval Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and you'd be forgiven for thinking that you were reading *Lord of the Rings*, or a particularly apocalyptic section of the Bible:

AD 793. This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery dragons flying across the firmament. These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine: and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of January in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-island, by rapine and slaughter.<sup>8</sup>

This might sound like *Game of Thrones* meets *The Vikings*, with slaughtered monks and actual dragons but it's actually a contemporary account of one of the first Viking raids in Britain. The History Channel historical drama series, *The Vikings* (premiered 2013), made use of documents like this to create an almost-believable portrayal of the Viking Age, although later series are less historical and more drama.

Vikings are a chance to show the story behind 'history,' to delve into how these ever-popular marauders have been portrayed different ways in different periods. In the nineteenth century, Vikings were famously depicted with winged or horned

helmets. Later academics moved away from romanticism and conclusively disproved the existence of the horned helmets.<sup>9</sup> (It's interesting that the main image most people have of the Vikings, pervasive even today, is false.) A flurry of books and papers pointed out what great sailors, explorers, traders and artists these men really were.<sup>10</sup> It's certainly true that the superbly seaworthy and beautiful viking longships enabled Vikings to settle as far west as America (briefly) and Ireland (much more successfully) and as far east as the Ukraine and Istanbul (bodyguards to Byzantine Emperors).

This body of newer research went so far in tipping the balance in favour of the Vikings as traders and explorers that it tipped almost too far, and the essential truth that the Vikings were both traders and raiders was in danger of being lost.

Much has been made of the reasons for this era of Viking raids. There have been in-depth discussions about population densities and potential over-fishing of the seas around Scandinavia,<sup>11</sup> but putting aside all the hard work done on herring breeding, it could be argued that the question is being asked the wrong way round. Europe had already gone through generations of raiding and invasion; Visigoths, Angles, Saxons, Magyars – the list goes on. The Vikings were just one more generation of the age-old family business of rape and pillage, and their boat technology made them particularly hard to catch. Perhaps the main question to ask about the Vikings is why they continue to fascinate us, even without the horned helmets?

8 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, translated by James Ingram (London: Everyman, 1912), s.a. 793. Full text available online at Britannia, <http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/776-99.html>.

9 Johnni Langer, 'The Origins of the Imaginary Vikings,' *Viking Heritage Magazine* 2002, iss. 4, 6–9, [http://www.academia.edu/390901/THE\\_ORIGINS\\_OF\\_THE\\_IMAGINARY\\_VIKING\\_VIKING\\_HERITAGE\\_4\\_2002\\_GOTLAND\\_UNIVERSITY\\_CENTRE\\_FOR\\_BALTIC\\_STUDIES\\_VISBY](http://www.academia.edu/390901/THE_ORIGINS_OF_THE_IMAGINARY_VIKING_VIKING_HERITAGE_4_2002_GOTLAND_UNIVERSITY_CENTRE_FOR_BALTIC_STUDIES_VISBY).

10 See, for example, Philip Parker, 'A Brief History of the Vikings,' *History Extra*, 25 May 2016, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/viking/a-brief-history-of-the-vikings/>.

11 Sharpe, John C., 'The Viking Expansion: Climate, Population, Plunder,' dissertation (2002), University of Montana Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3862>.

BELOW: Screenshot of 'The Condensed History Gems' podcast.

### Using Popular Culture in History Teaching

You can see from our examples above how a large range of subjects can be made relevant to your students by finding ways to link them in to modern popular culture. This can really help students to find a way into a subject which may otherwise appear entirely foreign and separate from their lives. Of course there is a danger in using popular culture to teach history. There are many films and television programs set in particular historical periods or featuring specific events, and yet it is important to keep foremost in the student's (and our) minds that these works are created primarily for entertainment. For example, the recent Churchill biopic, *Darkest Hour*, features a scene where Winston Churchill meets Londoners in the Underground, a scene which probably never took place, and is certainly not documented as ever happening. When we use popular culture as a jumping-off point for history, we must, therefore, take care that students never mistake a film, book or television show for history itself.

So look through popular culture for ideas, inspirations and jumping-off points for your lessons, and as long as you are careful to show your students how to separate evidence-based fact for fiction, you can find this a very rewarding way to engage the class!

*The concept of linking popular culture and teaching history has been turned into a new podcast called 'Neon' by Jem Duducu where each week he looks at TV, movies, video games or other forms of pop culture and reveals the real history that's lurking behind the façade:*

[https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/neon/id1355727374?.](https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/neon/id1355727374?)

*Greg Chapman produces his weekly podcast 'Greg Chapman's Tales from the Road,' with stories of travelling around performing his history-based shows at events and historical locations across the world:*

[https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/greg-chapmans-tales-from-the-road/id593351744?.](https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/greg-chapmans-tales-from-the-road/id593351744?)

*The two work together each week on the 'Condensed History Gems' podcast, dealing with a wide range of historical subjects, and always looking at new ways to make these subjects exciting and relevant:*

[http://condensedhistorygems.podomatic.com/.](http://condensedhistorygems.podomatic.com/)

