Year 7 History assignment and Literacy Rich task: How and why do historians have different views of King John?

Was King John really such a bad king?

**Key word**

Interpretation: a view or an opinion on the past.

Interpretation 1: King John was a bad king.

Interpretation 2: King John was not a bad king.

**Source 1**

“Though he enjoyed no great success and met with both kinds of luck, he was certainly a great prince.”

13th Century Barnwall Chronicle, a diary probably by a monk at Barnwall priory

**Source 2**

The servants brought a robber to King John. The robber had murdered a priest. John said ‘he has killed an enemy of mine, let him go. In 1209, Geoffrey, a priest, said it wasn’t safe to work for King John and when John found out Geoffrey was imprisoned and starved. He died an agonising death.

Written in the 1200s by Roger Wendover, a monk. Note that the Geoffrey mentioned in this source did not die until 9 years after King John.

**Source 3.** John was a tyrant* rather than a king. Owing to his own laziness he had lost Normandy and he was eager to lose the kingdom of England or destroy it. He took much money from his subjects. He did not always support the Catholic Church.

Adapted from Matthew Paris a monk in the 1200s

*A person who rules cruelly and unjustly

**Historian A**

The diaries kept by monks have been shown by modern research to be completely unreliable in what they said about John, because they listened to gossip and rumour directed against a monarch who had upset the Church... King John was... a first-class general, a clever diplomat* and a ruler who developed... English law and government.

Maurcie Ashley the life and times of King John 1972

* represents their country abroad

**Historian B.**

John did not inspire confidence. This was perhaps his defining characteristic. John’s career to 1199 was marked by ugly instances of treachery and disaster. He was also weak, indecisive and unchivalrous*. He was deemed untrustworthy, suspicious, and advised by evil men.

Dan Jones, historian, 2013

*Code of good behaviour followed by knights
**Year 7 SA** How and why do historians have different interpretations of King John?

**Was King John really such a bad king?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John lost most of the land other kings had gained in France</td>
<td>King John was a clever diplomat and a ruler who improved the efficiency of law courts</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Magna Carta is one of the first steps on the road to democracy.</td>
<td>He travelled more widely in England than any other king. Also took an interest in the welfare of ordinary people</td>
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<td>He taxed the people more and more to pay for the battles he kept losing</td>
<td>John lost Normandy, the birthplace of William the Conqueror in France. He has the nickname ‘Softsword’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>King John was guilty of acts of cruelty, deviousness, and betrayal, but this was not that unusual behaviour of kings during this period.</td>
<td>John argued with the Pope so much that he closed the churches for seven years</td>
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</table>

**Tasks**

1. Sort the statements in the table into good/bad/a bit of both.
2. Which historian agrees that King John was a bad king?
3. Which source might this historian have studied?
4. Which historian argues that King John was not a bad king?
5. Which source might this historian have studied?
6. Why do we have to be careful trusting the evidence of monks of the time?