

Working with Primary Sources

The task of historians might well be compared with that of Sisyphus, the ancient Greek king who, having offended the gods, was condemned to eternally roll a large rock up a mountain, only to have it ceaselessly fall back down. Like Sisyphus, historians work at a mission that can never be completely successful—to recapture the past before it is lost forever in the mists of time and fading memory. The evidence available is always partial and fragmentary. Historians themselves are limited and fallible, for they operate often at a great distance—in both time and culture—from those they are studying. And they rarely agree on important matters, divided as they are by sex, nationality, race, and values, all of which shape their understandings of the past.

Despite these challenges, scholars and students alike have long found their revisiting of the past a compelling project—intensely interesting, personally meaningful, and even fun—particularly when working with “primary” or “original” sources, which are the building blocks of all historical accounts. These sources include written documents, such as letters, diaries, law codes, official records, sacred texts, and much more, as well as visual sources, including artistic products, buildings, and artifacts—all of them generated at the time of or soon after the events that they describe or depict. Such sources are windows into the lives of our ancestors, though these windows are often smudged and foggy. Primary sources enable us to listen in on multiple conversations from the past, eavesdropping, as it were, on our ancestors, though frequently hearing only snippets. According to one witty observer, this is history as gossip.

Using primary sources effectively is no easy task. Unlike contemporary history books, which are designed explicitly for a modern audience, the sources that historians work with were produced in circumstances and with cultural assumptions that are often quite unfamiliar to twenty-first-century students. Furthermore, our ancestors’ understandings of their own lives and time were subject to distortions, fabrications, misunderstandings, and ambiguity. And so working with sources requires effort—very careful reading or observation, systematic analysis, and historical imagination.

The documents and visual sources at the end of each chapter of *Ways of the World* provide an opportunity for you to practice the work of historians. It is a kind of guided “history laboratory.” In working with these materials, you are “doing history,” much like lab experiments in chemistry courses represent “doing science.” Since each document or visual sources feature explores some theme of the chapter, the chapter narrative itself provides a broad context for analyzing these sources. The introduction to each feature and to each document or image offers more specific context or background information, while questions provide specific things to look for as you examine each document or image as well as a focus for using those sources collectively to probe larger historical issues.

Working with Written Documents

Written documents are the most common type of primary source that historians use. Analysis of documents usually begins with the basics:

- Who wrote the document?
- When and where was it written?
- What type of document is it (for example, a letter to a friend, a political decree, an exposition of a religious teaching)?

Sometimes the document itself will provide answers to these questions. On other occasions you may need to rely on the introductions.

Once these basics have been established, a historian is then likely to consider several further questions, which situate the document in its particular historical context:

- Why was the document written and for what audience? Under what circumstances was it composed?
- What point of view does it reflect? What other views or opinions is the document arguing against?

Inspiration and intention are crucial factors that shape the form and content of a source. For instance, one might examine a document differently depending on whether it was composed for a private or a public readership or whether it was intended to be read by a small elite or a wider audience.

Still another level of analysis seeks to elicit useful information from the document.

- What material in the document is believable, and what is not?
- What might historians learn from this document?
- What can the document tell us about the individual who produced it and the society from which he or she came?

Here historical imagination is essential. Informed by knowledge of the context and the content of the document, your imagination will help you to read it through the eyes of its author and its audience. How might this document have been understood at the time it was written? But in using your imagination, you must take care not to read into the documents your own assumptions and understandings. It is a delicate balance, a kind of dance that historians constantly undertake. Even documents that contain material that historians find unbelievable can be useful, for we seek not only to know what actually happened in the past but also to grasp the world as the people who lived that past understood it. Historians sometimes speak about reading documents “against the grain,” looking for meanings that the author might not have intended to convey. For example, the Law Code of Hammurabi in the document feature of Chapter 2 depicts an impressive system of justice in ancient Mesopotamia, but it can also be read as an account of the numerous problems or conflicts that the society had to confront.

While each document must be read and understood individually, historians typically draw their strongest conclusions when they analyze a number of documents

together. The document features in *Ways of the World* are designed to explore sets of primary sources that address a central theme of the chapter by drawing on several related texts. In the documents for Chapter 11, for example, you can reflect on the Mongol Empire by reading several accounts written by Mongols themselves and several others composed by Russian or Chinese victims of Mongol aggression. Or in Chapter 21, you will need to balance several quite positive assessments of life under Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin with others that are devastatingly critical of that communist regime during the 1930s.

Working with Visual Sources

Artifacts that derive from the material culture of the past—religious icons or paintings that add to our understanding of belief systems, a family portrait that provides insight into presentations of self in a particular time and place, a building or sculpture which reveals how power and authority were displayed in a specific empire—these kinds of evidence represent another category of primary source material that historians can use to re-create and understand the past. But such visual sources can be even more difficult to interpret than written documents. The ideas that animated the creators of particular images or artifacts are often not obvious. Nor are the understandings they conveyed to those who viewed or used them. The lovely images from the Indus River Valley civilization contained in the visual sources feature for Chapter 2, for example, remain enigmatic although still engaging to twenty-first century viewers.

Despite the difficulties of interpretation, visual sources can provide insights not offered by written documents. Various images of the Buddha shown in Chapter 4 effectively illustrate how the faith that he initiated changed as it spread beyond India to other parts of Asia. And the images deriving from World War I that are featured in the visual sources for Chapter 20 convey an immediate emotional sense about the meanings attached to that conflict that the written word can hardly match. Indeed, for pre-literate societies, such as those explored in the visual sources for Chapter 1, archeological and artistic evidence is all that remains of their history.

To use visual sources, we must try as best we can to see these pieces of evidence through the eyes of the societies that produced them and to decode the symbols and other features that imbue them with meaning. Thus, context is, if anything, even more crucial for analyzing visual evidence than it is for documents. Understanding the art of the Maya elite, featured in Chapter 6, depends heavily on some knowledge of Maya history and culture. And the images in Chapter 19 illustrating Japanese perceptions of the West in the second half of the nineteenth century require some grasp of Japan’s overall historical development and its encounter with Europe and the United States.

A set of basic questions, similar to those you would ask a written document, provides a starting point for analyzing a visual source:

- When and where was the image or artifact created?

- Who made the image or artifact? Who paid for or commissioned it? For what audience(s) was it intended?
- Where was the image or artifact originally displayed or used?

Having established this basic information about the image or artifact, you may simply want to describe it, as if to someone who had never seen it before.

- If the source is an image, who or what is depicted? What activities are shown? How might you describe the positioning of figures, their clothing, hairstyles, and other visual cues?
- If the source is an object or building, how would you describe its major features?

Finally, you will want to take a stab at more interpretive issues, making use of what you know about the context in which it was created.

- What likely purpose or function did the image or artifact serve?
- What message(s) does it seek to convey?
- How could it be interpreted differently depending on who viewed or used it?
- What are the meanings of any symbols or other abstract features in the visual source?
- What can the image or artifact tell us about the society that produced it and the time period in which it was created?

Beyond analyzing particular images or objects, you will be invited to draw conclusions from sets of related visual sources that address a central theme in each chapter. What can you learn, for example, about Muslims' perceptions of their prophet Muhammad from the images contained in the visual sources feature of Chapter 9? Or what do the images in Chapter 13 show about Aztec understanding of the Spanish conquest? Moreover, you will need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of various types of visual source for answering questions posed by historians.

Primary sources—documentary and visual alike—are the foundation for all historical accounts. To read only secondary sources, such as textbooks or articles, is to miss much of the flavor and texture of history as it was actually experienced by people in the past. It is also to miss the exciting and highly controversial process by which historical narratives and analyses are constructed from scattered and fragmentary pieces of evidence. Immersing yourself in the documents and visual sources presented here allows you to catch a glimpse of the messiness, the ambiguity, the heartaches, and the achievements of history as it was lived and of the historian's craft. Enjoy!

Prologue

The Three Cs of World History: Change, Comparison, and Connection

Not long ago—in the mid-twentieth century, for example—virtually all college-level history courses were organized in terms of particular civilizations or nations. In the United States, it was Western Civilization or some version of American History that served to introduce students to the study of the past. Since then, however, a set of profound changes has pushed the historical profession in a different direction.

The world wars of the twentieth century, revealing as they did the horrendous consequences of unchecked nationalism, persuaded some historians that a broader view of the past might contribute to notions of global citizenship. Economic and cultural globalization has highlighted both the interdependence of the world's peoples and their very unequal positions within the global network. Moreover, we are aware as never before that our problems—whether they involve economic well-being, environmental deterioration, disease, or terrorism—respect no national boundaries. To many thoughtful people, a global present seemed to call for a global past.

Furthermore, as colonial empires shrank and new nations asserted themselves on the world stage, these peoples also insisted that their histories be accorded equivalent treatment with those of Europe. An explosion of new knowledge about the histories of Asia, Africa, and pre-Columbian America erupted from the research of scholars around the world. All of this has generated a “world history movement,” reflected in college and high school curricula, in numerous conferences and specialized studies, and in a proliferation of textbooks, of which this is one.

This world history movement has attempted to create a global understanding of the human past that highlights broad patterns cutting across particular civilizations and countries, while acknowledging in an inclusive fashion the distinctive histories of its many peoples. This is, to put it mildly, a tall order. How is it possible to encompass within a single book or course the separate stories of the world's various peoples? Surely it must be something more than just recounting the history of one civilization or culture after another. How can we distill a common history of humankind as a whole from the distinct trajectories of particular peoples? Because no world history book or course can cover everything, what criteria should we use for deciding what to include and what to leave out? Such questions have ensured no end of controversy among students, teachers, and scholars of world history, making it one of the most exciting fields of historical inquiry.

■ **Change**
What historical circumstances help to explain a growing interest in world history in recent decades?