

Primary Source Analysis

1. What is a primary source?

These are documents, letters, and other written accounts, material objects, images, sites and monuments that provide first hand evidence about a historical event or time period. These sources are contemporary with the ancient civilisations and historical events with which ancient historians and archaeologists engage and should throw light on the aspect of ancient history, ancient civilisations or ancient religions with which you are engaged.

2. How to choose your primary source?

This is dependent upon the aspect of the past with which you are engaging. You might be interested in a specific text, the writings of a specific author, an historical event, or a specific aspect of daily life, ritual practice etc. Your choice of source should allow you to draw out a more detailed understanding of your research topic, as you are dealing directly with something dating to that time period, event, or social/cultural history.

3. Specific issues you might have to deal with when choosing your primary source

- Ancient texts: are you able to look at the in the original language, or are you dependent upon a translation. Think very carefully about which translation you are using and make this clear in your analysis (and why you have chosen this one). If you are using your own translation indicate this in the introduction.
- Artefacts, objects, images/representations, sites and monuments: are you able to access the original and study it first-hand? If so be sure to indicate in the text that this is from your own personal observation, with your own measurements, photographs, drawings etc. If not think carefully about the (secondary) source you will have to use (excavation reports, museum catalogues and photographs etc.). Where you are dependent upon the work of other scholars cite this, where you are able to make your own observations (descriptions etc.) make it clear that this is your own work.

4. First steps: content and context.

- Text: identify the author, audience and historical context. Identify any bias and acknowledge the author's perspective or point of view.
- Object, image/representation, sites and monuments. Where was this found, what is the date of the material? What about an object with no fixed provenance (can we assign it to time/place on stylistic grounds).

5. Your Analysis: Observation

a) Texts

- Materiality of text (**if** you are dealing with the original source). What medium is it written on and how is it inscribed (pen and ink, carved in stone, impressed in clay etc)? Is it monumental, intimate, written in a specific script (e.g. hieroglyphic

or demotic). You might not be able to address this if you are dependent on a text in translation or transcribed in a volume of ancient texts.

- What is the text about? Provide a brief summary of its contents. Who was intended to read it (public, private, the gods etc.)? What is the text's purpose? What was the author's message or argument? What were they trying to convey? Is the message explicit? Are there implicit messages as well?
- What can a careful reading of the text tell you? How does the author try to convey their message? What methods do they use? Think also about the choice of words, language, use of metaphor. What about the silences--what does the author choose NOT to talk about? Can you assign this to a specific genre? How is your analysis influenced by the translation of the text?
- What (if anything) do you know about the author? Perhaps their ethnicity, identity, class, sex, age, occupation, or religion? Is this important for reading and analysing the text and why? How credible is the author?

b) Object/Image/Site/Monument:

- What do you see? Describe in your own words (size, shape, material, colour, adornment, spatial configuration etc.). In some places you might be dependent on a secondary source (museum catalogue, excavation report), for example for precise measurements.
- Explanation: what is the meaning or significance of the objects, symbols, etc.? How much are you dependent on inference, analogy, or previous scholarship to identify the meaning of things? Think about the approaches to iconography and materiality covered in the module.

6. Scholarship

Although this is a primary source analysis it is important for you to situate your own work within the wider literature. You should also consider how your primary source has been analysed by previous scholars and place your own work within a wider framework of scholarship. Do you agree with previous approaches or find them limiting and proscriptive? How does your analysis and interpretation fit with that of other scholars? Does this source help you to support or challenge their arguments?

7. Evaluation

You need to consider what your source tells you about a given historical event/time, ancient civilisation or aspect of an ancient religion? Does it help you answer specific historical, social or cultural questions?

- Does it tell you about social behaviour, ideology and belief systems?
- What class of people does the source relate to (and how is it biased?): elites, ordinary people, gendered narratives etc.?
- What are the limitations of your source? Are there any questions that it cannot help you answer?