

Using sources

What are primary and secondary sources?

For the sake of simplicity we will begin with the conventional answer to this question. Historians name the various sources they have used to carry out their research by providing a bibliography at the end of their writing. These bibliographies are usually divided into two categories of research materials. Primary sources are listed first, followed by secondary sources. As this ordering suggests, primary sources are regarded as the most important for historical research. These sources might take the form of documents and old texts held in archives and libraries, archaeological remains and old buildings, old newspapers, film footage, recordings of interviews from the period being studied. Secondary sources consist of the writings of other historians about a particular historical topic or event, and they are held to have a different kind of value to original sources. Secondary sources written by historians commonly appear in forms such as monographs, journal articles, popular histories and textbooks.

The privileged status that the raw data in primary sources enjoys among historians has been true since the mid-nineteenth century and the Rankean injunction that to know the past one must first know the archive. This is not to say, of course, that Ranke and his contemporaries invented archive-based history writing. But it was Ranke who inspired modern historians to adopt the critical reading of original documents as the basis for their professional training and scholarly practice. Under Ranke at the University of Berlin, history

students attended seminars where they learned to read and analyse medieval documents. Following Ranke's pioneering work in the German archives, historians have long favoured the use of sources that were generated (temporally and geographically) as close as possible to the event that they describe, rather than, for example, a memoir written by an eyewitness years afterwards. Also, for several decades after Ranke's death in 1886 historians were primarily interested in the kind of official documents held in state archives that were the evidence base for writing histories of high politics and diplomacy.

Since the early twentieth century, however, the range of primary sources regarded as legitimate for historical research has expanded greatly. One reason for this is methodological. From the founding of the *Annales* approach to writing history in 1929 onwards, social and cultural historians in particular have gradually become more willing to incorporate almost any available source within their research materials – from the testimony of living witnesses, to landscapes to Disney cartoons. This turn towards new kinds of sources is largely a consequence of historians becoming more open minded about which topics of study they would regard as 'historical' subjects. For example, whereas Ranke had focused on the histories of state politics, historians in the *Annales* school wanted to be able to explain how human cultures in particular regions (not necessarily within one country) changed over time, and why. They wanted to delineate the economic, psychological, social, intellectual and physical structures of these lived cultures, and to do this they realised that they would need to go beyond the traditional topics of politics and the lives of great men. In pursuit of this holistic or 'total' history, *Annales* historians drew freely on the methods and resources of other academic disciplines – geography, sociology, anthropology and economics. And they were similarly pluralistic in their use of non-official sources: ranging from the analysis of tree rings and parish records to the study of manuals on interior decoration or evidence of people's eating habits.¹ Another reason for the proliferation of new sources is technological. From the early printing presses to modern databases and Internet forums, the ways in which human cultures have generated, preserved, processed and organised data have grown at pace. A problem facing contemporary historians now is the massive volume of data that is potentially available for their research. To borrow an example used by Keith Jenkins, imagine trying to write a history called 'Yesterday in New York'.² Consider the potential range and mass of primary sources – qualitative and quantitative – that might be used in such an account: the many millions of events and experiences that people in New York might recall for a researcher, the output of the entire electronic media available in the city that day, the

paperwork generated by every civic or community organisation, the combined texts of the print media, the movement of stock prices, the registers of births and deaths, recorded crime statistics, data relating to public health – the list could go on, but hopefully the point has been made.

A final example we will use to illustrate the broad range of primary sources that historians now consult is taken from Akram Fouad Khater's *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East* (2004). This book lists 74 different sources that include:

- an Ottoman government decree defining the official notion of the 'modern' citizen, 1870
- the Treaty of Peace and Commerce (Treaty of Turkmanchai) between Iran and Russia, 1828
- *Anis al-Jalis*, an Egyptian magazine on a vision of women and their role in society, 1899
- Shaykh Ben Badis's fatwa against French naturalisation of Algerians in *Al-Basha'ir*, journal of the Association of the *Ulama* of Algeria, 1937
- US President Truman's statement supporting Jewish immigration into Palestine, 1946
- Asadollah Alam's diary entries on some elements of the Shah of Iran's rule in 1976 and 1977
- US consular documents on US diplomats' assessment of the Iranian revolution, 1978
- Internet discussion of marriage and education for Saudi women, 1996
- article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* in which Arab and Israeli soccer players discuss ethnic relations in Israel, 2000
- selection from a roundtable discussion of globalisation and its impact on Arab culture, 2000.

In contrast to the kind of sources listed above, secondary sources are the writings of other historians. Because they are interpretative – and thus likely to be challenged or superseded by later accounts – secondary sources sometimes have only a limited shelf life. By this we mean that whereas medieval historians will almost certainly continue to read the Domesday Book (a vital resource for scholars of late eleventh-century England) a hundred years from now, it is unlikely that many of today's history books will still be widely read (if at all). With the exception of a few classic texts, most historical accounts eventually pass from being the latest version of some subject to becoming out of date, and thus deleted from the publisher's catalogue and removed from

all but the largest libraries' shelves to make space for new material. When we refer to historians' writings in a collective sense we use the term 'historiography'. In addition to his or her reading of primary sources, a historian working on a particular subject is expected to show a thorough knowledge of the work of other historians in that field. They will be expected to show how their work stands in relation to these other accounts, in terms of their methodology, interpretations and use of sources. This is what tutors mean when they tell students that their own writings should display 'historiographical awareness'.

At the risk of confusing matters, we should note here that the apparently clear division between primary and secondary sources just described does not always apply. What we conventionally regard as secondary sources can in fact be used as primary sources, depending on the nature of the project in which they are put to work. An intellectual history that describes how historians have written about their subjects over time will use historians' accounts as its primary sources. For example, Georg Iggers' *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (2005) uses the collection of other historians' writings as the primary sources for an intellectual history of modern history writing. This means that a book such as Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) would usually be regarded as a secondary source for someone studying the Inquisition in southern France in the fourteenth century, but as a primary source for someone writing a history of how Annales historians wrote about their subjects. In other cases, historical accounts are a kind of hybrid of primary and secondary source – neither quite one nor the other. Arthur Marwick places into this ambiguous category autobiographies and contemporary histories, such as Churchill's history of the Second World War (which is part memoir, part traditional narrative history). Accounts like these combine the author's eyewitness testimonies (usually regarded as a primary source) and an interpretation of the events being described that draws on a reading of other sources (usually regarded as the property of a secondary account).³ We believe that this rather confusing state of affairs suggests two things. The first is the potentially problematic and artificial nature of the primary/secondary source division. The second is that it illustrates how historians have tended to make a fetish of manuscript sources and old documents, while simultaneously assuming that 'proper' secondary sources did not really exist before history as an academic profession came into being in Western Europe in the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, we recognise, of course, that the benchmark of historical research remains tied to the critical use of primary sources. This is not simply a matter of academic prestige: it relates to a set of cultural practices that have

material consequences. How far a piece of history writing is based on a systematic study of primary sources is an important consideration for Ph.D. examiners, editorial boards of journals, academic book publishers and research funding councils. For these reasons the ‘gold standard’ of history writing is still taken to be the research monograph – a detailed study of a subject, based extensively on primary sources, heavily footnoted, finished with a lengthy bibliography and often published by a university press. Below this in the hierarchy come articles in prestigious journals and chapters in edited books. Further down the list are found textbooks or synoptic analyses. These books aim to summarise what historians collectively know about a subject, rather than to offer ‘new’ knowledge based on primary sources. Maintaining that there is a clear distinction between primary and secondary sources (in terms both of their identity and their value) is crucial for reconstructionist historians. This is because it helps to support their epistemological explanation of history – that the past is objectively knowable via their selection, verification and critical reading of primary sources. They argue that primary sources are special because they are the original traces or relics of the past. They believe that such sources are unprocessed, authentic and unmediated – in short, free from interpretation. Reconstructionist historians also tend to further classify primary sources into those that are documents of record and other, discursive sources. The former are understood as essentially state documents, largely produced and consumed by the bureaucracy: edicts, laws, treaties, minutes of meetings, memoranda, key state papers, dispatches, telegraphs (more recently e-mails) and treasury accounts. Discursive primary sources include other people’s accounts of what happened, such as reports of meetings, handbooks, guides, diaries, pamphlets, newspaper articles, sermons and literary and artistic sources. They are considered to be inferior to documents of record because they are held to contain various degrees of interpretation, subjectivity and bias. What they tell us is taken to be inseparably linked with the opinions and considerations of the author. Similarly, official sources are seen by some to take precedence over private sources on the grounds that the latter are assumed to be more subjective than the former. The idea here, for example, is that a personal letter will be contaminated by ‘opinion’, whereas an official government document can be trusted to deliver the ‘facts’. Using the same reasoning, secondary sources are considered to be inferior to primary sources (in terms of their evidential value) because of the presence of the author’s interpretation.

Not all historians, however, agree with the traditional way of defining and separating out primary and secondary sources that we have described above.

Postmodernist historians tend not to see the primary/secondary distinction as crucially important. Instead they focus on a particular source's relevance to their research project. Those sources that are most important to the project – the ones that provide the evidence that forms the basis of their arguments and upon which the quality of their work will be judged – they regard as primary sources. Equally, those sources that provide background information, which inform their theoretical approach and which they use to provide a context, they regard as secondary. The classification for postmodernist historians is less to do with providing epistemological justification for their understanding of the status of historical knowledge and more about providing a bibliographical aid to the reader and making explicit what evidence they have used to justify their arguments. A good example of this is Greg Denning's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992). Instead of making the conventional distinction between primary and secondary sources in his bibliography, Denning lists all the sources he has used in alphabetical order and provides a detailed notes section at the end of the work where he acknowledges the specific sources that he has used to make particular arguments. Moreover, the arguments that Denning makes throughout the book to explore why the mutiny on the *Bounty* took place rely on evidence from a variety of traditional and not-so-traditional sources. These include captain's letters, log books, journals, orders from the admiralty, legal decrees, published books, anthropological descriptions of Tahiti, pantomime programmes and feature films about the mutiny.

Postmodernist historians also argue, as we will see below, that all sources involve interpretation: they are written from someone's perspective, and thus no source should be regarded as objective. One way to illustrate this is by using the example of documents produced in legal proceedings. A reconstructionist like Deborah A. Symonds would argue that such documents of record are largely free from interpretation – they are a true and accurate account of what was said in court. Postmodernists would take a different view, arguing that such records are as positioned (and thus 'subjective') as more obviously personalised or partisan sources. They would say that the contents of records of evidence given in a court of law were framed by the legal framework in place at that time, and the specific expectations of those who were involved in the legal process in question. Those giving evidence would be conscious that they were retelling events not to friends or family but to judges and juries who had power over liberty, life and (sometimes) death. Thus they may have adapted their language or stressed different aspects of the event that they were being asked to recall, depending on how they read the demands of their

immediate situation. Moreover the court's rules of evidence and the prescriptions of the court concerning what can and cannot be said, as well as the questions of the prosecutor or inquisitor, all constrain and shape the evidence a witness could give about their experience – in effect, the protocols of the court system can be seen to constitute an already-in-place interpretation of events. It follows from this that what might appear at first to be a transparent recording of events – the transcription of evidence given in court – is in fact an interpretative act.

How do historians use sources?

Historians regard primary sources as the evidence base for their accounts of the past. For those who favour a straightforward empirical and reconstructionist approach to writing history, primary sources are the closest that we have to an encounter with the past itself. According to the genre rules of history writing, the best way to justify a statement relating to the past is by citing an original source as corroborating material – sometimes by quoting that source itself within the account, at other times by referencing the source in the form of a footnote or endnote. This genre rule applies with greater force in the case of original research – such as a historical monograph or journal article – than in synoptic accounts based on other scholars' writings. The convention of citing a primary source in support of a statement also depends on the type of claim that is being made. Statements that refer to common knowledge need no support, but ones that might be contested or are not widely known will need corroboration. So, for example, making a point about population growth in nineteenth-century Northern Mexico will require some supporting source material, but stating that Mexico City hosted the Olympic Games in 1968 will not. This way of using sources has been the convention of history writing for some 150 years. The injunction to read, use and cite original sources is still widely observed by historians, even by those who might be described as writing postmodern or deconstructionist histories. The correct use and interpretation of primary sources is a fundamental protocol in the historical method and is a key expectation of the genre of academic history writing. Readers, researchers, historians, journal editors, book publishers and students expect to read academic histories that are grounded on the use of primary sources and that make clear, consistent and intelligible references to them (and in the case of history textbooks – or synoptic analyses – that they integrate material from other historians' primary source-based work). Writing about the past in ways that do not adhere to this convention is usually classified as something

other than academic history – such as historical fiction or some other genre of writing about the past. It is also worth acknowledging here that the ways in which we use primary sources as historians have ethical implications. In our selective use of sources we choose to give a voice to some people in the past but to ignore the voices of others; we judge that some people have left us ‘reliable’ evidence while others are not to be trusted; we narrate our accounts of the past through the particular perspectives of our chosen sources – which, as Dominick LaCapra suggests, contributes to the way in which the historian becomes implicated in, identifies with and undergoes forms of ‘affective involvement’ with their own ‘objects’ of study.⁴

At an early stage in a research project a historian will need to know what main body of primary sources they intend to use and what kinds of research questions those sources might help them to answer. As the research progresses there is a kind of dialogue between what the historian would like to write about and what the primary sources enable them to justifiably state. Once they have identified and gained access to their primary sources, historians need to know how to make critical use of them. It is important that we do not simply regard primary sources as containers of authenticated facts, but that we consider what they can tell us about identities, mentalities (ways of interpreting the world), and the various (often contested) relationships that exist between individuals, on the one hand, and collectives, cultures and societies, on the other. For example, letters written by new immigrants to the USA or soldiers in the First World War do not simply provide the historian with data as to what life was like in nineteenth-century America or in the trenches. They can also inform us about how individuals tried to establish and communicate the meanings they attached to their lives, how they used letters to shape their own and their communities’ identity, and particularly how, in the case of immigrants, they were used to shore up a fragile sense of self.⁵ However, we should not assume naïvely that such letters provide a transparent window into the writers’ inner lives – their opinions and perceptions. In order to produce a more informed and nuanced reading of these sources we need to recognise that letter writing has always been constrained by societal norms and expectations. For example, letter-writing manuals and editions of published letters have modulated the ways in which people expressed themselves in this format. Returning to our example above, model letters were provided to soldiers in the First World War to give them a ‘correct’ way of interpreting and communicating their experience. Moreover, the ways in which people express themselves in any given period are always related to prevalent conventions of discourse in society. In some contexts we might also need to be alert to the

fact that letters would have been censored according to security, ideological, religious or moral considerations.⁶

In practice, historians make critical use of primary sources by asking certain types of questions about them. We summarise these questions below.

- Is the source in question authentic – that is, is it really from the time, by the author, and the type of document that it purports to be?
 - Is it a later inscription of an earlier speech or document?
 - If so, how might this affect the way that we read the document?
- Who wrote or produced the source, and what do we know about them that might help our understanding of it?
- What kind of perspective does the author/producer adopt?
- When was it produced?
- What kind of source material is this, and how does this affect our reading of it?
- What functions did the source originally fulfil?
- How might contemporaries have understood it?
- What does it say (and what doesn't it say)?
- Does it say similar or different things to other sources from the period? Does it cohere with other sources/evidence from the period?
- Does it cohere with information in other histories?
- How have other historians in the field used this source?
- Is it a translation?
 - If so, how might this affect the source? How can we be sure that the translation is accurate? But more importantly, we need to recognise that the translation will be an interpretation of the original by the translator.
- Is the source in its original form or is it a reproduction – a transcribed, printed version or a facsimile – and what problems might these pose for a historian? Transcribed texts are, in a fundamental way, also translations. The transcriber generally normalises spelling and grammar and interprets unclear words. In so doing, they place their own interpretation on the text. Edited texts sometimes omit parts of the original. The editor will select those sections that she deems to be important and, as a result, she presents her interpretation of the work to audiences. Moreover, when transcribing handwritten texts to print, some meaning can be lost or changed. For example, handwriting can often reflect the writer's emotional state – particularly useful when reading diaries or personal letters – but this is lost in transcription. Marginalia such as exclamation marks, comments

and qualifications by readers or by the author may be omitted as well. Is the spatial placement of texts maintained from the original? For example, when we read a digitised version of a newspaper article we do not always see where this article was originally positioned – the juxtaposition of one text with another can affect how these texts might have been read originally.

- If it is not in its original form, do we know how the text in question was originally circulated?

We might also add the following considerations from discourse theory:

- We should be alert to the plurality of possible readings for words or phrases.
 - Different terms often meant different things to different audiences – that is, words do not necessarily have the same meaning over time and between different interpretative communities.
- We should check for the use of binary distinctions in the text because this can tell us a lot about how audiences constructed ideas of self and other.
- We need to think about the use of metaphor to create meanings within texts.

In addition to these questions and considerations there are other, community-based conventions for using primary sources in history writing. Historians should never deliberately misrepresent the contents of a source in an effort to prop up a line of argument. This means that when they quote from or paraphrase a source they must do so accurately. Moreover, they should not lift fragments of a document out of context in ways that give a false impression of what that whole document might reasonably be taken to mean. However, observing these rules of scholarly etiquette does not necessarily mean that the study of original sources takes us towards the ‘reality’ of the past. Although historians of all types agree about the necessity of reading texts from the period in question, and also about how to use them, they disagree about their understandings of what type of knowledge these sources might be expected to yield. As we discuss in more detail below, the study of primary sources helps historians to produce more detailed, textured and authoritative pieces of writing. But however intellectually rewarding such writing might be to read, we should not simply assume that the rigorous use of primary sources provides historians with a way to access to the past on its own terms.

Do primary sources provide access to the past?

We share the view that historians (and history students) should continue to make critical use of primary sources. Reading original sources is an important part of the subject's intellectual and cultural traditions. To borrow a line of thought from Richard Rorty, historians can do no more than make best use of the tools and resources that are available to them to do their work. In this sense, we might regard primary sources as the resources we have for this work and modes of critical reading as our tools for doing it. The more 'old' texts we read, the more we expand our vocabularies for writing history and the more skilled we become at performing our particular 'language game'. As we have noted already, according to the genre rules of history, primary sources are the final reference point in the procedures that enable historians to make justified statements about the past. If we want an audience to accept the validity of what we write, we will be expected to show that we have used the available evidence in acceptable ways – and to explain why we have declined or neglected to cite sources that might contradict our accounts. Primary sources are the last 'court of appeal' for historians who disagree with each other about how to account for the same set of events. Can two historians in such a dispute substantiate their accounts by referring to original sources? If so, can each of them show that they have used their sources according to the procedural rules of the profession? Have they drawn reasonable conclusions or inferences from the sources, using them to justify their descriptions of part-whole or whole-part relationships in their accounts? If both have done so, we simply have to accept that their different (competing) histories are both equally 'correct' – and conclude that each writer had their own particular reasons for producing the account that they did.

However, some historians bestow much more evidential weight on primary sources than we have in the paragraph above. In some minds, primary sources give historians a kind of access to the past itself, unmediated by the interpretive work of other historians. According to Arthur Marwick, 'the essential concern of history is with the sustainable truth which painstakingly, and often opaquely, emerges from the sources'.⁷ By 'sources' here, Marwick was specifically referring to primary sources. In a piece called 'Living in the Scottish Record Office' (1999), American historian Deborah A. Symonds makes a similar point to Marwick's as she describes her experience of working with original documents in an Edinburgh archive. For her, reading the manuscripts on eighteenth-century criminal cases was not simply a matter of processing and evaluating data. It was a physical and emotional sensation – a

kind of empathetic contact with the past itself. Symonds recalled how she continually lost all sense of present time and her surroundings in the archive, becoming immersed in the other world that she was reading about in the documents. It was this feeling of being transported back in time via the primary sources that led her to state:

At the risk of arrant romanticisation, I am inclined to argue that historians must hold the original documents of whatever they study, look at the paper, and smell everything. Only by coming face to face with surviving documents, seals, letters, maps, accounts, and receipts can one, I believe, fully weigh the meaning of terms like intention, falsification, and truth.⁸

The idea that stores of archival materials are somehow reflective of the past itself has an obvious appeal for some kinds of historian. It enables them to claim that if the sources are in correspondence with the past, and if their historical account of something is in correspondence with those sources, then logically their historical account must be in correspondence with the past. This is the thinking behind the kind of ‘reconstructionist’ or empirical history that seeks to guarantee its knowledge claims about the past.

However, there are several problems with the model that links past–archives–histories together in such a fixed manner. First, the deposits of documents available in archives are highly fragmented, variable, arbitrary and contingent. They are partly the result of accident (what happened to be recorded, what happened to be preserved, what has survived accidental destruction) and partly the product of politics and culture (the editing activities of archivists and librarians, funding decisions by various agencies to catalogue one set of records instead of another, choosing to make particular records available in digital form, releasing some documents to the public but withholding others).⁹ Second, the ways in which a particular historian might access archival materials depend on any number of external factors. How much research time does she/he have for the archival work involved in her/his current project? Do they require (and can they get) funding to visit distant archives? Do they have the language (or palaeographic) skills to read relevant documents? What levels of energy and concentration does the researcher bring to their work in the archive on any given day (which may affect their note-taking and thus citation of sources in the final account)? As Antoinette Burton argued in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (2005), historians have long maintained a relative silence about the ‘personal,

structural, and political pressures which the archive places on the histories they end up writing – as well as those they do not’.¹⁰ Third, a shift from a correspondence or referential theory of meaning or language use (which conceives of the meaning of a word in terms of its relationship or correspondence to an object or entity in the world) to a use-based theory (which argues that ‘the meaning of a word is its use’ or that meaning is determined by how a community of language users actually use the term), means that texts can no longer be understood as having fixed, definitive meanings.¹¹ All texts are open to multiple readings, depending on the context in which they are read, by whom, and for what purposes – which is not to say, of course, that texts can mean anything we want them to mean. And if, as a consequence, no text can be given a final authoritative reading (and thus subjected to a ‘closure’, after which there would be no further ways of interpreting or re-describing it), then we must let go of the idea that primary sources are simply reflective of the time and place in which they were produced. They can always be read in subtly (but important) different ways, according to the needs of the researcher and his/her research question.

Fourth, beyond the level of corroborating a simple factual claim, primary sources do not simply tell historians what they want to know about the past. For example, Hansard *Parliamentary Debates* provides a transcript of Winston Churchill’s first speech to the House of Commons as British Prime Minister on 13 May 1940. We can therefore be reasonably sure about what he said – allowing for the fact that speakers can correct the transcripts of what they say, and that ‘errs’ and ‘ums’ and other verbal slips are excised. But in order to evaluate the speech, to make a judgement about why he said those words in that particular way, or to make some points about the speech’s political importance, we have to use inferential reasoning. This means that we move from particular data (the speech) to general conclusions (about its various functions and levels of meaning). In practice, this means that we use our knowledge of context (recognising that this is itself based on reading other texts) – the speech was made just three days after Churchill became Prime Minister, it followed a recent British military defeat in Norway, Churchill was Prime Minister but not yet the leader of a political party, his predecessor had been deposed partly because he seemed to want to conciliate rather than fight the enemy, and Germany had just launched its offensive on Western Europe. We apply our knowledge of mid-twentieth-century British parliamentary custom – its debating procedures, its traditions of adversarial exchange, the conventions governing language use and modes of address. We use what we know about Churchill as an orator, politician and minister. And we use

our knowledge of other sources (such as John Colville's and Hugh Dalton's diaries) to make the point that, with this speech, Churchill passed his first public test as Prime Minister. We can see why it was widely agreed that Churchill had said the right things, at the right time, by politicians, newspaper commentators, civil servants and the public. Put this way, inferential reasoning looks like a useful way of working. But we should not mistake it for a way of guaranteeing historians' judgements. Inferential reasoning is not a 'reliable' methodology as such. It is largely a matter of intuition and experience, a 'feel' about what the sources might yield, with the important procedural decisions left in the hands of the historian (which of the available contexts will they decide to employ? what other corroborating sources are available and will they cite? what will they do about those other sources that they haven't yet read, but which might cause problems for their argument? – and how will they signal to the reader which sources they have yet to consult?). Finally, there is the problem of the relationship between the sources and the written account. How will the primary sources be deployed, combined and weighted in the historian's text? When and where will the historian quote directly from the source(s)? What governs their choice about the length of any given quote? When will they paraphrase part of a document, or perhaps simply cite a source in a footnote to support a claim? In other words, instead of regarding sources as data that give us access to the past, we should see them as resources that historians deploy figuratively to justify their statements and ensure that their work qualifies as 'history'.

Example of primary source analysis

Fethname (*victory letter*)

Ottoman *fethnames* (victory letters) provide an interesting example of the potential complexities inherent in source analysis. *Fethnames* are early modern Ottoman state documents that record and celebrate Ottoman victories and conquests. Such documents were variously sent to Ottoman state officials and governors; read aloud in Ottoman towns and cities; sent to foreign rulers; incorporated into Ottoman histories; and included in other literary collections. Such a *fethname* was written to celebrate the Ottoman conquest of Eger castle in today's Hungary in 1596. There are a number of versions of this *fethname* in existence today. One was sent to the English Queen Elizabeth I and is in the National Archive. Another was copied by the sixteenth-century Ottoman historian Selaniki into his history of the Ottoman Empire. Selaniki also notes that the *fethname* he copied was originally sent

to the chief judge of Istanbul and was intended to be read aloud on the streets of the city to inform the population of the great victory. A third version was included in a nineteenth-century Ottoman printed edition of a collection of Ottoman cultural writings. And lastly, there exists an English translation of an Arabic version of the *fethname* sent to a Yemeni emir. These four extant versions of the Eger *fethname* are commonly assumed to be essentially the same, as they all describe the capture of the castle in basically the same way. However, the small textual differences, together with the re-inscription of the *fethname* in different textual contexts, provide evidence that the Eger *fethname(s)* had diverse functions and audiences and are not therefore simply the same source copied in different documents.¹²

The implied *fethname* that Selaniki describes in his history as being read aloud on the streets of Istanbul was ostensibly intended to communicate news of the conquest to the Ottoman people. However, it may also have been designed to convince the Ottoman population of the validity of a long and costly war and of the greatness and magnificence of the empire. In doing so, it helped to create public memories which in turn served as a form of social cohesive and provided a sense of identity.

In contrast, the inclusion of the *fethname* in Selaniki's history serves a very different function. Although it provides information about the victory, Selaniki has already provided a full description of the capture of the castle. Therefore the inclusion of the document at the end of his narrative appears to serve a similar function to a modern historian's quotation and citation of primary sources: that is, it serves to validate and authorise his work as a true and accurate history and himself as a respected historian because his history is based upon official documents. Moreover, Selaniki's *fethname* includes an additional section defending the actions and eulogising the grand vizier which was not included in that sent to Queen Elizabeth and in the nineteenth-century printed version. The inclusion of this section in Selaniki's version of the *fethname* is perhaps not surprising, given that he was employed by the grand vizier soon after the latter was appointed to his post.

The *fethname* sent to Queen Elizabeth, although largely similar to the others, does include a number of small lexical differences that indicate that it served another purpose in addition to that of providing information about an Ottoman victory. These differences mainly concern the religious terminology used, which suggests that the Ottomans specifically rewrote the *fethname* to take account of Queen Elizabeth's Christian faith. While not all Qur'anic references are removed, those that remain refer to events also found in the Bible. Specific references to Allah are replaced with the phrase 'the supreme sovereign'. Moreover, the concluding section of the English *fethname* differs from the others by mentioning the role of the English ambassador in that year's Ottoman military campaign and offering hope for the success of the English fleet which had been sent against the common enemy of the English and the Ottomans, the Spanish Habsburgs. The inclusion of these last comments provides evidence that one of the functions of this *fethname*

was to be a tool of diplomacy and to maintain and reaffirm the cordial Anglo-Ottoman relationship.

The English translation of the Arabic-language *fethname* sent to the Yemeni emir has also been rewritten to account for the religious beliefs of its recipient. This version employs a more pronounced Islamic framework and, in particular, exploits the rhetoric of antagonistic religious difference to narrate events, with numerous references to the sultan as an exemplary Muslim waging jihad against the infidel. This *fethname* seems to have been sent with the hope of reinforcing the loyalty of the Ottoman's representative in the Yemen to the Ottoman Empire as well as reminding him of the power and strength of the empire. However, the fact that we have available only the English translation of the Arabic original means that we have to be very careful in drawing conclusions, as we do not know how accurate a translation it is.

The last example is a nineteenth-century printed edition of a much earlier manuscript collection of examples of Ottoman cultural writings. While in the early modern period such collections would have been used by scribes, secretaries and bureaucrats as style and protocol templates, it is very unlikely that this would have been the function of the nineteenth-century printed version. It is far more likely that it, just like the printing of a number of Ottoman 'classic' histories at this time, was intended to establish a particular set of shared social memories of an Ottoman golden age that would help to create a proto-national sense of Ottoman identity. Therefore we cannot read this version of the *fethname* unproblematically as an exact copy of an earlier sixteenth-century *fethname*. Many nineteenth-century printed editions of earlier manuscript versions of Ottoman histories demonstrate differences in vocabulary and also omit some sections of text. For example, this *fethname* is much shorter than the other versions. Unlike the others, it only describes the capture of Eger castle and not the subsequent battle of Mezokeresztes, which the Ottomans only just managed to win. It therefore acts as a powerful iconograph of a golden age of Ottoman victory and success, which contrasts significantly with the military and economic problems that the Ottoman Empire suffered in the nineteenth century.

As we have seen, the various extant versions of the Eger *fethname* served different functions and allowed different potential meanings to be created by different audiences. Source analysis is therefore not simply a matter of extracting 'facts' or documentary evidence about a particular event – in this case the capture of a castle. We also need to ask for whom each particular version was written and why. We need to pay close attention to seemingly insignificant differences as well as the textual framing of the document. And we must therefore be very cautious about uncritically relying on copies of primary sources in collected source books, edited editions, transcriptions and translations and printed versions of originally manuscript texts.

Further reading

- Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird *History beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009). Explores the critical use of cartoons, musical soundscapes, photographs, the Internet, landscape, film and television, oral testimonies and the built environment as sources.
- Antoinette Burton (ed.) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Contains a range of personalised reflections from scholars about their experiences of working in archives. The testimonies collected are a useful reminder that, while archives remain central to historians' work, they are anything but neutral repositories of information.
- Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds) *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London: Routledge, 2009). A good introduction to interpreting and using a variety of primary sources, with chapters on the use of novels, autobiography, speeches, court files, letters, newspapers and diaries, among others. It also includes an introduction which discusses some general approaches to textual analysis and interpreting primary sources.
- Suraiya Faruqi *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). A very useful introduction to both European and Ottoman archival and narrative sources on Ottoman history which discusses the sources in the context of current research questions, issues and projects.
- Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (eds) *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008). These essays argue that archival collections of materials are always the product of an interested perspective, and that the materials they contain are always read from an interested perspective. The importance of serendipity, chance discoveries and personal connections with archival documents is a theme that links the various contributions.
- Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). An idiosyncratic but thought-provoking restatement of Marwick's view of history writing as an empirical and objective discipline. Marwick had a habit of using personal abuse against anyone he disagreed with in this text. Chapter 5 provides a lengthy discussion of his ideas about primary sources.