

Primary Source?

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Historians define a primary source as the original document or manuscript. That source could be records, letters, court documents, chronicles, etc. Any copy of the original is defined as a secondary source, and notes, glossaries, etc. can be defined as a tertiary source. All of these sources are read and examined by historians in order to explain a specific part of the past.

For historians of the European Middle Ages, however, these simple definitions do not solve the problems they confront. First, there is usually only one manuscript/document, which often has limited access. Secondly, medieval documents are hand-written, meaning anyone who is reading a manuscript must decipher the writing. Thirdly, no medieval manuscript is written in any modern language, and so someone reading the source should have a good reading of the language of the source. Learning to read a Medieval primary source takes time, talent, and training.

Other problems consist of fragile and incomplete documents (2). For reasons of restricted access and the need to learn how to read an old language, most medieval historians use large source collections such as the *Monumenta Germanicae Historica* (the *MGH*) or the *Early English Text Society* (3). The documents of these collections usually have regularized texts, glossaries, and discuss the origin of the original manuscript. The documents of these collections can be considered secondary sources, and many of them are of great use and excellent quality. Medieval historians could not work without them.

Historians read these sources critically. No matter what the classification, the quality and usefulness of a source cannot be determined until that source is thoroughly read and examined. Scholars of the Medieval History discuss the quality of any source, whether it is an original manuscript, a regularized copy, or a complete translation of the source. Any classification scheme is of little consequence.

Much more importantly the Middle Ages is not the exclusive territory of historians. Other academic disciplines have an interest in the period. These disciplines are Archaeology, Art History, and Literature. They have their own purpose, methods, and standards.

If Medieval History is one of the dominant fields of the period, then Medieval Literature is the other. Scholars of Literature must have some of the same skills as those who study history: they must be able to read the source/story in its original language. 200 years or so ago, reading the language of these old manuscripts presented a considerable problem for both History and Literature. The scholars of both disciplines were almost required to learn the techniques of philology, a form of linguistics, in order to read sources. Several sources for historians, such as the Icelandic Sagas, were originally studied as Literature (4), and they still are considered Literature.

But scholars of Literature do not have the same purpose as scholars of History. Where historians attempt to explain the past using a variety of sources, literary scholars explain the use and meaning of a period's fictional or semi-fictional stories. For a historian to use a story as a source, the scholar of literature must first explain the work's structure, plot, and characters in depth.

Art Historians explain stylistic changes in paintings, pictures, carvings, sculpture, dress, decorative items (such as furniture and jewelry) and architecture. They have completely different sources than historians, and many universities have a separate library for the study of art and art history. Obviously, certain works of art cannot be brought to the scholar for examination.

For these reasons, Art Historians are dependent on a variety of resources. Before the internet, many a college art history department kept a collection of photographic slides. Some of these collections have been uploaded to the internet. Other resources consist of museum exhibition catalogs, auction house catalogs, museum websites, articles in specialized periodicals, and many others. But the

most interesting resource for art historians, especially medievalists, are facsimiles. A facsimile is as faithful as possible a copy of entire work. Medieval and Renaissance psalters, books of hours, uniquely illustrated bibles, and other important works often have a facsimile for scholars to use. Some of the older facsimiles have been uploaded to the internet.

But I would hesitate to call these sources “secondary” because of the nature of what’s being studied. For art historians the “primary” source—the actual work—is obvious. The photographs and facsimiles of these works—electronic or hard copy—are not documents, and so are examined differently. Art is not so much read as examined for certain elements (5). Respect for the process of examination, and the resulting publication, is important more than how that publication is labelled.

In its most “pure” archaeology derives facts from the human past that is unwritten. Strictly speaking, the archaeology of the European Middle Ages is *historical archaeology*. This does not mean that Medieval Archaeology is subservient to Medieval History. Certain geographical areas and periods are dominated by archaeology for information (6).

At its core archaeology attempts to explain past human habitation. The explanation involves the finding and excavation of settlement areas, cemeteries, and wreckage (especially marine and underwater wreckage). Excavations are not haphazard. The process of archaeology involves site survey (7), a strategy for excavation, extremely careful excavation, documentation of the site, context, and finds, and conservation of that site and the finds. Such a process may take years, but the publication(s) of the site and what is found is an end result. Such publications should be treated in respect to that process, and a historian should acknowledge the efforts that brought the work forth.

Taking these disciplines into account, the classification scheme used by historians should not be abandoned, but it should only be used with documentary sources dated to a particular time and from a

specific place. A translation of a source should be called a translation, an archaeological dig-report should be called an archaeological dig report, and a facsimile should be called a facsimile. Judging the usefulness of these sources should take into account the disciplines that produced them. The idea that one classification scheme should be used for all sources is disrespectful to the people and the effort they put in to publish that source.

No matter what a source is called, that source must be read or examined before its quality is determined. What you call a source isn't as important as what you think about it. Writing documentation isn't simply a list sources found, but a reflection of critical thinking. In this way, the project becomes more complete and of greater use to those interested.

Notes

1. The author has an MA in Medieval History.
2. The handling and conservation of older documents is an entire profession, which requires extensive training.
3. There are other sources collections such as the *The Rolls Series*, *The Patrologia Latina*, and *Acta Sanctorum*. Use of these collections is routine.
4. Wawn, Andrew. *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth Century Britain*. Rochester, New York: DS Brewer (2000).
5. These elements are color, condition, size, and texture. The provenance of any work of art (if possible) is also important in Art History.
6. Such as Northern Europe and Scandinavia from about 450 AD to 1100 AD—defined as the Early Middle Ages.
7. Archaeological site survey techniques have undergone a revolution in the last couple of decades with the introduction of ground-penetrating radar, laser-scanning of the landscape, aerial photography, and satellite scanning and mapping. All of these techniques allow the archaeologist to better plan any excavation.