Chapter
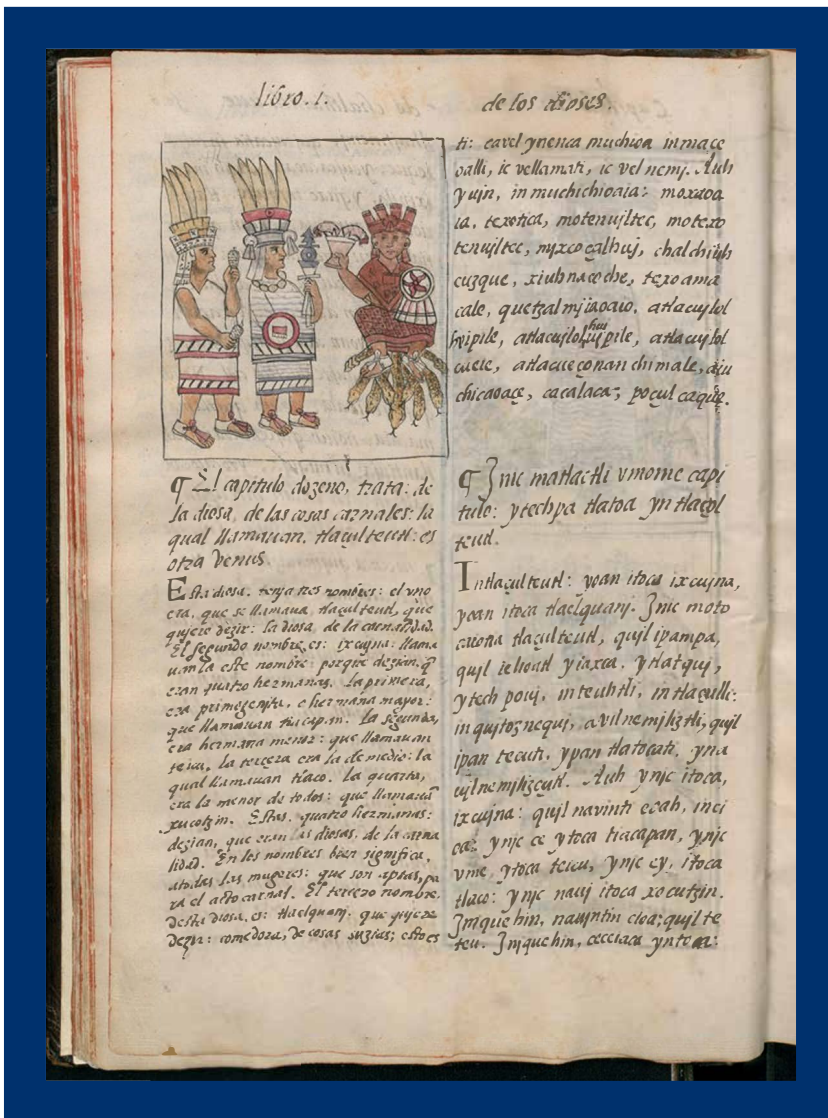# 3

How Do We Go Beyond the Primary and Secondary Source Binary? (Dimension 2: History)

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Figure 1. *The Florentine Codex*

How Do We Go Beyond the Primary and Secondary Source Binary?		
C3 Disciplinary Focus History	**C3 Inquiry Focus** Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence	**Content Topic** Aztecs; Spanish Conquest; Crimean War; Gilded Age

C3 Focus Indicators

D1.5.6–8. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of views represented in the sources.

D2.His.9.6–8. Classify the kinds of historical sources used in a secondary interpretation.

D3.2.6–8. Evaluate the credibility of a source by determining its relevance and intended use.

D4.2.6–8. Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.

Pedagogical Approach Sourcing Inquiries		
Suggested Grade Levels 6–12	**Resources** Library of Congress, See Appendix	**Time Required** 15–30 minutes

Imagine a ninth-grade history class. The teacher is at the front of the room next to a projection of a text. Before the class begins reading, she initiates a standard routine. It sounds something like this:

> Teacher: Before we read, what do we always have to do? Jason?
>
> Jason: You have to check the source.
>
> Teacher: Good! So, what kind of source is this?
>
> Jason: Primary, because the author was really there.

From there, the class goes on to read the text and answer questions about its contents. Although this brief exchange is fictional, it represents a typical way in which texts are introduced, discussed, and categorized in high school social studies classrooms. A similar episode may have happened in dozens of schools across the United States this week. The unremarkable nature of the episode invites investigation. Why has this routine become typical? What is the value in that interaction? And, most importantly, where does it go next?

The educational attention to sources is tied to the project of making history classrooms incubators of historical thinking. For over thirty years, teachers and scholars in the United States have been trying to prepare students to understand the reading, thinking, and processes of academic historians (Wineburg, 1991). That work necessarily begins with sources. Sources are historians' tools, and students cannot begin to understand how historical narratives are constructed without a language for describing sources and

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experience interpreting (Chapman, 2017; Wineburg, 2001). Giving students direct access to various types of sources is a prerequisite for teaching the C3's vision of inquiry. Indeed, the inquiry arc's third dimension, Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence, is entirely reliant on sourcing. True engagement in inquiry, and in the thinking that historical inquiry is intended to inspire, however, depends on going beyond merely providing students access to sources. Recent research suggests that over the past thirty years students have improved at identifying source information, but the development of that skill has not yet resulted in becoming more proficient at thinking historically (Jay, 2021) or prepared to consider the connections between the past and present (Miles & Gibson, 2022). Developing students' ability to use sources authentically requires teaching them to go beyond the neat categories of "primary" and "secondary" sources (Lederle, 2011). This chapter explores how teachers can pose authentic historical problems to engage students in wrestling with sources in ways that extend beyond the simple sorting task of identifying whether a source is primary or secondary.

Authentic experiences with history require exposing sources' instrumental nature. A text can only be a primary or secondary source in relation to a historical question. Historians treat sources not as fossils with innate characteristics but as tools to be used to solve a problem. As with all tools, the value of a source depends on its relationship to the job at hand. When they were written, Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, Gibbon's *Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Hannah-Jones' *1619 Project* were all intended to be secondary sources. They look back upon the completed past and describe actors, events, and epochs that their authors did not personally experience. And yet, each one of these texts can be transformed into primary sources without changing a single word. A presidential scholar, a historian of late eighteenth-century English perspectives on the world, or a person hoping to understand the contemporary controversies about the teaching of race in America would find that each of these texts reveals as much about its author and the moment in which it was written as it does about its purported subject matter. Even a history textbook, that least primary of all sources, becomes a primary source to a historian interested in how Americans tell the story of the United States (e.g., Loewen, 1995; Zimmerman, 2005). All texts, including histories, are produced by authors who are themselves immersed in the flow of history. As a result, all sources are limited, and their limitations are directly related to their situation in history in ways that defy simple categorization. Primary sources may be created closer to an event, but that proximity is a double-edged sword. It might circumvent the erosion of memory caused by time, but all memory is fallible, and participants in an event may hold greater motivation to narrate the event from their own perspective. Secondary sources lack immediacy, but chronological distance does not guarantee impartiality or perspective. There are real differences between primary and secondary sources, but those differences do not present consistent meanings for readers. A student, like Jason in our imagined ninth-grade class, who is asked only to identify the difference between primary and secondary sources, is not being given an opportunity to think through what those differences might mean for his own personal historical inquiry.

Worse still, some students may take the descriptive distinction to be a hierarchy, trusting primary sources over secondary sources without sufficient skepticism.

Unfortunately, many students do not have opportunities to grapple with the value, reliability, and appropriateness of sources in their social studies classes. Establishing the difference between primary and secondary sources is an essential first step for introducing students to the work of constructing historical narratives, but that distinction is often insufficient for solving historical problems. Unlike the simplistic binary that many social studies classrooms teach, historians actually categorize sources in varied and dynamic ways (e.g., Martin, 2021; Seixas, 2016). If students are only given the chance to name sources as primary or secondary, they lose opportunities to engage in real historical thinking. When students are adequately supported, they can think about evidence in nuanced and authentic ways (Marczyk et al., 2022). If, however, students are not afforded the opportunity to discuss challenging sources, they are less likely to develop complex frameworks for thinking historically. The challenge before us is developing instructional tools that help students get beyond the binary and develop experience that positions sources as tools for historical inquiry.

Sourcing Inquiries

The following section outlines three Sourcing Inquiries, brief activities to help students gain practice thinking through the complexity of historical evidence. The aim of each inquiry is to spark discussions that give students short collaborative opportunities to begin thinking about sources beyond the binary distinction of primary and secondary. None of these inquiries is meant to take the place of extended analysis and inquiry. Instead, think of them as social studies brainteasers that make the knotty inscrutability of the past visible and inviting without requiring teachers to revamp entire lessons or units. Teachers' time is precious, and curricula are already overstuffed. The sample Sourcing Inquiries presented here are written to be brief and to showcase flexible instructional principles that teachers can adapt to fit their classroom content.

The Sourcing Inquiries are intended to complement the C3 inquiry arc. Not only is the entirety of Dimension 3 dedicated to evaluating evidence, but historical sources also comprise a subsection of historical disciplinary authenticity in Dimension 2. Further, reconsidering sources as tools to answer questions also fosters a direct connection to the focus in Dimension 1 on questioning. The centrality of sourcing to the C3 Framework underscores the necessity of giving students opportunities to learn about sourcing throughout their social studies education, allowing them to return to the foundational concept year after year with increasing levels of sophistication.

Each of the following Sourcing Inquiries uses sources drawn from the vast archives of the Library of Congress and follows a similar structure. Teachers are asked to briefly introduce a compelling source, prompt students to categorize it, and, over the course of the ensuing

discussion, introduce new information or perspectives to complicate students' initial responses. Designed to take under 30 minutes of class time, each inquiry aims to prevent students' categorizations from calcifying and to highlight these sources' possibilities as historical tools. Teachers might use these tools in any number of content areas and with any number of sources. Each of these might be embedded in a lesson covering more traditional content and would not demand that teachers alter the structure of their instruction. While these inquiries are written for ninth-grade students, teachers are encouraged to adjust them to serve students between middle school and the end of high school. With only a little prompting, students can think historically about sources that are difficult to categorize. This chapter hopes to help teachers imagine activities that give students opportunities to not only learn *about* history but also *practice* history.

Sourcing Inquiry A: The Mexica and Complex Secondary Sources

This Sourcing Inquiry asks students to consider some of the variations that can exist within the category "secondary source." The aim is to expose the limitations of relying on broad categories of sources and to demonstrate that secondary sources, like primary ones, are written from perspectives that ought to be scrutinized.

This example takes place within a world history class. One of the recurring challenges for world history teachers is avoiding the pitfall of telling the history of the world from a Western perspective (Conrad, 2018; Dozono, 2020). One manifestation of this trend is the tendency of many world history curricula to reduce the history of the Mexica (commonly called the Aztecs) to a footnote in the story of Spanish conquest, rather than an independent people with their own history, perspectives, and experiences. Teachers seeking to address this curricular bias might wish to provide students with Mexica accounts of their encounter with the Spanish in 1519. Unfortunately, there are few preserved primary source accounts of the Spanish invasion, thanks in part to widespread book burning led by Spanish missionaries (Elliott, 2021). Much of the remaining textual evidence from that time comes in the form of codices, such as the *Florentine Codex* (see Figure 1). This text, an account of the Spanish conquest of the territory then called New Spain, was compiled in 1577 under the direction of the Spanish Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. The codex is a result of multiple translations. Mexica elders wrote accounts in the pictorial script of their language, Nahuatl. The Nahuatl was then transliterated into the Latin alphabet by Mexica Nahuatl-speaking students at a Spanish missionary college, and this transliterated script was then translated into Spanish under Sahagún's direction. The final codex is arranged in two columns with the Spanish text running alongside the transliterated Nahuatl. For years, Western historians relied on the Spanish text, but more recent scholarship has shown that the Nahuatl text is not precisely parallel and is often more critical of the Spanish invaders (Berdan, 2021; Townsend, 2021).

This Sourcing Inquiry is centered on the question, "Why do historians believe the Nahuatl column is more accurate?" Teachers can launch this discussion by displaying an image of a codex page, such as Image 48 (Figure 1), offering a brief overview on the difference between the columns, and asking the central question. The central question is intentionally more guiding than the alternative, "Which column do you think is more accurate?" to avoid engaging students in an inauthentic problem-space. While the more open question may initially appear more engaging, it is a false dilemma. Public and scholarly consensus holds the Nahuatl text as preferable to the Spanish account, and students are likely to quickly realize that a third-hand account overseen by the colonizing Spanish is less reliable than the Indigenous text. What students are likely to find more complicated, and therefore more compelling, is articulating the rules behind why the Nahuatl text is preferable. At first, they may be tempted to claim that the Nahuatl is a primary source, but teachers can complicate this answer. The Nahuatl in the codex is a transliteration of written accounts compiled nearly sixty years after the events they describe. In purely chronological terms, neither the Nahuatl nor the Spanish columns are primary sources. From there, students might posit useful but imperfect responses, such as "If you cannot get a true primary source at least take the one closer to the time period," "I don't trust European sources," or "Translations are always unreliable." Ultimately, there is no one correct answer. Ideally, students should push past the framing of the question to argue something like, "We have to look at the circumstances of when this was made. The students who were translating knew that Spanish friars were looking over their shoulders. They probably felt like it was only safe to be honest in Nahuatl." In this case, perspective and context are more illuminating than the source's date or genre. Through discourse, students can see that hard and fast rules for categorizing sources will always be constricting. Teachers might replicate this sourcing inquiry with a wide variety of translated texts, particularly those whose production occurred under some degree of surveillance or coercion.

Sourcing Inquiry B: Fenton's Crimean War Photography and Unreliable Primary Sources

The immediacy of photography can be alluring to students. A powerful photograph plays on two key student assumptions: that images are unbiased and that primary sources are inherently more trustworthy than secondary ones. This second Sourcing Inquiry is designed to call those assumptions into question.

Roger Fenton was one of the world's first battlefield photojournalists. In 1855, he was a first-hand witness to the Crimean War as the Russian Empire fought against the alliance of Great Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire. The war encapsulated a number of long-term trends within the geopolitical sphere of Europe. For Great Britain and France, their victory secured the continuation of their eras of imperialism. For the loser, Russia, and the lesser powers manipulated throughout the war, including the Ottoman and Austrian empires, the

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Crimean War highlighted their dwindling power, exclusion from the imperial land rush, and ongoing cultural marginalization. In retrospect, the Crimean War can be considered an omen prophesying the intensifying scale of combat to come in the American Civil War, the Taiping Rebellion, the Franco-Prussian War, and World War I. The Crimean War's status as one of the first photographed wars is an indicator that these changes in warfare were intimately bound up with changes in technology, a coevolution vividly conveyed by Fenton's photographs.

Fenton's most famous photograph is *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, which shows a road pockmarked with cannonballs following a battle. The eerie still of the image, as well as the title's allusion to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Crimean War ode, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," evoke both horror at the carnage that has occurred and fear of that yet to come. It is one of the earliest photographs of war, presaging changes in how battles were conducted and how the public came to understand current events. It was also probably staged. Archival research has unearthed a second photograph by Fenton in which the road running through the valley is clear of cannonballs, and scholars now believe that Fenton likely carried the cannonballs onto the road to make a more dramatic image (Morris, 2007). History's first iconic photograph of war may be a fake.

Teachers should facilitate this Sourcing Inquiry in phases. After a brief introduction to the Crimean War, teachers can display *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* and help students identify the salient visual elements like the cannonballs and thoroughfare before asking students, "Is this photograph a primary source?" Students will likely offer a brief affirmation along the lines of "since Fenton was really in Crimea and really took this photograph, it is a primary source." Teachers can then introduce the hypothesis that the photograph was staged to complicate students' thinking and ask whether that changes students' categorization of the source. After gathering initial opinions, teachers can initiate the final phase of the discussion by asking, "Why might it matter if this is a primary source?" and "For what questions might this be considered a primary source?" Through discourse, this Sourcing Inquiry offers students an opportunity to grapple with the question of what it means to be a primary source and what we can expect a primary source to tell us. To replicate this discussion, teachers may replace Fenton's photograph with another which scholars believe to have been staged.

As an extension, this Sourcing Inquiry could take on additional significance if teachers draw a connection between the Crimean War and subsequent Russian military actions into Crimea and present-day Ukraine. Reports of disinformation and propaganda, such as staging or altering photographs, proliferate on social media (Paul, 2022), a powerful manifestation of what Dimension 2 of the C3 calls "change and continuity." Connecting to the present also provides an opportunity for teachers to engage Dimension 4, Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action. Students could be prompted to identify cases of manipulation or staging in their own sphere of media or to author guides for identifying misinformation. As this case study demonstrates, understanding sourcing is a bridge toward contemporary media literacy.

Sourcing Inquiry C: Advertisements as Traces

This final Sourcing Inquiry asks students to explore sources that were not initially intended to provide accounts of the past. This inquiry uses advertisements as a case study of historical traces (Seixas, 2016), a form of evidence that might be useful to historical inquiry but requires a different set of considerations. Advertisements are primarily works of fiction, their images showing imagined characters enacting scenarios that never really occurred. They cannot be considered primary source accounts when they make no effort to accurately describe the past, which makes it difficult to argue that they are primary sources. At the same time, advertisements speak to consumers' thinking, hopes, and fears. As such, they can be essential artifacts for historical inquiry.

In 1923, the Prudential Insurance Company of America commissioned M. Leone Bracker to create a series of images advertising life insurance. The resulting series of images is comprised of snapshot melodramas. In the first painting, a husband and wife gaze upwards out of the frame of the painting in awe as a caption tells the reader that "Prudential has the Strength of Gibraltar." Dozens of other couples in the background beam with the same rapturous gaze as an angelic figure bearing a cornucopia floats above them. In the second image, "The Family Friend," a young woman in distress sits between two men. One man represents a stock swindler. His grasp on her shoulder is reptilian and threatening. On the woman's other side is a genteel and grandfatherly insurance agent. Insurance is the family friend. In the final image, a mother, presumably recently widowed, receives an insurance check. The picture uses overtly religious iconography. The light bathing the insurance agent forms a halo as he extends his hand towards the kneeling mother who clutches a swaddled baby. The three images are thematically unified, telling a story in which the Prudential Insurance Company is the protector of young families. Despite the realistic style of the paintings, the images' overtly symbolic staging offers the viewer a clear indication that the pictures are not meant to be taken as literal representations of specific events.

As teachers initiate the Sourcing Inquiry, they should ensure that students have a firm comprehension of the context. Once students are situated within the period, have a basic understanding of insurance, and are able to interpret the images at a literal level, teachers can ask whether these images are primary sources. Students' initial answers are likely to be in the negative as the images are clearly designed with the intention to persuade, not to inform. Teachers should then ask whether they are secondary sources. Students are likely to be even more certain that these are not secondary sources, as they make no effort to retell or synthesize information offered by primary sources.

Teachers can then complicate students' certainty by asking, "What can we learn about the 1920s from these images?" As students are likely to realize, the advertisements are suffused with information. They are manifestations of the advent of mass marketing, the expansion of financial networks, and the burgeoning middle class. The images' appeals to consumers are founded on assumptions about who might be attracted by the indicators of class, gender,

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race, and religion encoded in the advertisement. The melodrama of the images stems, in large part, from their relationship to the fears that consumers might have felt at a time when there was no government-backed social safety net and speculation was rife, two themes that presage the Great Depression. Even Bracker's personal history, as an artist who trained and worked as a propagandist during World War I prior to working in advertising, demonstrates broader trends in the way that the language of American symbols and images were developed. Once students have reached some of these points, the teacher should return students to the question of categorization by re-asking, "Are these advertisements primary sources?" There are multiple productive avenues radiating from this question. Students might begin to suggest that they are primary sources for people studying attitudes and advertisement in the 1920s, which would be a powerful reconnection between source and question. Or they might explain that this is neither a primary nor secondary source, thereby working their way towards a theory of historical traces. The point is not that students arrive at a definitive recategorization but that students realize the limitations that such categorizations place. Historical archives provide a number of advertisements, propaganda pieces, and other ephemera that teachers might use to pursue similar sourcing inquiries.

Teachers looking to connect this example to C3 Dimension 4, Taking Informed Action, might have students replicate the analysis on contemporary advertisements. Teachers could encourage students to find examples of advertising within their own lives and ask what a future historian might learn about our current world and lives by looking at our advertising. This is a slightly different framework than asking students to analyze what makes an advertisement persuasive, which might be done in an English Language Arts class. Rather than focusing on the messaging of advertisements, encourage students to articulate the assumptions behind that messaging. For instance, a cereal box might advertise that its organic ingredients are healthy. It is no surprise that people would like to be healthy, but beneath that message lay assumptions that consumers are experiencing concerns about the spread of mass manufacturing technology and loss of control over their health. Those fears are connected to broader social trends that students are likely capable of identifying and vivifying with numerous examples. Students might take this even further by creating posters exposing these assumptions and encouraging other students and community members to engage in more critical literacy around advertisement.

Conclusion

History is a way of reasoning, not a codified body of information. Teaching students history must center on providing them opportunities to engage in that inquiry, questioning, and reasoning. The essential problem of history, the challenge that launches authentic inquiries, is that the past is messy and difficult to categorize. If we consistently present students with sources that appear simple and easy to categorize, we dilute the drama and necessity of

history. This chapter is an attempt to make history complicated and compelling without being overwhelming. None of these Sourcing Inquiries are intended as substitutes for sustained textual analysis as part of a larger historical inquiry. They are meant as scaffolds, preparing both students and teachers for deeper thinking, and teachers are encouraged to modify the tasks and concepts to fit their own students. Hopefully, this chapter excites teachers to delve into the work of teaching historical thinking through text and inquiry and helps students think beyond a simplistic binary between primary and secondary sources.

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