

## CHAPTER ONE



### *The Source: The Basis of*

### *Our Knowledge about the Past*

#### A. What Is a Source?

Sources are artifacts that have been left by the past. They exist either as relics, what we might call “remains,” or as the testimonies of witnesses to the past.

The first kinds of sources, relics or remains, offer the researcher a clue about the past simply by virtue of their existence. The wooden columns found at the site of a prehistoric settlement testify, for example, to the existence of a people and tell historians something about their culture. The pegs or dowels they used to fasten building materials further enlighten scholars about their technical skills and artistic capacities. By comparing their artifacts with those from other places, historians can further learn something of their commercial or intellectual relations (for example, by comparing frescos from the Cycladen island of Santorini with those from Crete).

In contrast, testimonies are the oral or written reports that describe an event, whether simple or complex, such as the record of a property exchange (for example, the donation of land to a medieval monastery or the sale of shares on the New York Stock Exchange). Speeches or commentaries are also testimonies. Vaclav Havel’s speech during the “Velvet Revolution” in Prague in 1989 is one such example; in it, he fulminated against the communist hard-liners and reformers and claimed the “Prague Spring” of 1968 as historical precedent for his own revolution. The authors of such testimonies can provide the historian information about *what* happened, *how* and in what circumstances the event occurred, and *why* it occurred. Nevertheless, few sources yield this information in

equal measure, and it is the historian's job to supplement the raw material available in the source itself.

Both relics and testimonies were usually created for the specific purposes of the age in which they were made. What are called relics were, typically, objects of practical use in daily life and only later, in the ages that followed, came to be treated as historical sources. The same is true of most testimonies, whether oral or written. They were composed to provide contemporaries proof of an act or of a right, or in order to inform them about a fact. Only rarely were they designed for the use of posterity, although that sometimes occurred. In contrast to a relic, the content of a testimony is thus usually more important than its form. Still, the form of such a report often tells the alert historian a great deal; to this point we will later return. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that one of the historian's principal tasks is to uncover the original purpose or function of the relics or testimonies that have come down to posterity, to divine what use they were intended to serve and what purposes they actually served at the time they were created.

Testimonies and artifacts, whether oral or written, may have been intentionally created, perhaps to serve as records, or they might have been created for some other purpose entirely. Scholars sometimes think of the first as having had an "intention," the second as being "unintentional." In fact, however, the distinction is not as clear as it may at first seem, for a source designed for one purpose may come to have very different uses for historians. For example, a film taken to record one event but which inadvertently captured another might well be "unintentional" in conception, as was the film of President John F. Kennedy's assassination taken by a bystander who meant only to record the parade for his private enjoyment. That film's role in history and in historical interpretation has, however, been profoundly more important. A memoir written to explain a life, a legal brief designed to prove a case in court, and a portrait commissioned by a noblewoman obviously are not innocent of design and motive, for they were produced with specific purposes in mind. To distinguish an "intentional" source from an "unintentional" is not to argue that one is more transparent, more reliable than another. Unintentional sources are unintentional only in the sense that they were not produced with the historian's questions in mind; they are not, however, otherwise "innocent." Conversely, intentional sources contain features not under the control of their authors and have lives beyond their original intentions. A memoir intended to justify the choices its author made during her life may, in fact, inadvertently reveal the uncertainties and untruths that she sought to conceal. It may, moreover, have been received in totally unexpected

ways, therefore affecting the future in ways the author would never have intended.

Historians must thus always consider the conditions under which a source was produced—the intentions that motivated it—but they must not assume that such knowledge tells them all they need to know about its “reliability.” They must also consider the historical context in which it was produced—the events that preceded it, and those that followed, for the significance of any event recorded depends as much on what comes after as it does on what comes before. Had the Boston Tea Party of 1773 not been followed by the American Revolution, it would have had considerably less significance than historians have since given it, and the very same newspaper report of the uprising, in the very same archive, would have had a very different status from the one it actually acquired. Thus, historians are never in a position—and should never imagine themselves as being in a position—to read a source without attention to both the historical and the historiographical contexts that give it meaning. This, of course, is the heart of historical interpretation.

Sources are thus those materials from which historians construct meanings. Put another way, a source is an object from the past or testimony concerning the past on which historians depend in order to create their own depiction of that past. A historical work or interpretation is thus the result of this depiction. The relationship between the two can be illustrated by an example: The diary left by a midwife who lived in colonial New England constitutes a source. On the basis of such a source, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich created a prize-winning historical study, *A Midwife's Tale* (1990). A source provides us evidence about the existence of an event; a historical interpretation is an argument about the event.

Although when we use the term “source” we have in mind these primary sources, such sources can themselves be direct or indirect. A direct source might be the letters or chronicles that come to us from eighteenth-century businessmen, a law code written in 846, or a poem penned just yesterday. An indirect source might be an eighteenth-century inventory listing the letters and books found in an educated woman’s study, from which scholars could deduce something about the kind of training she had received and her intellectual interests; or, to pursue the examples given here, it might be an eleventh-century register cataloging the contents of a princely archive that named the ninth-century code; or it could be a computer printout of sales of poetry volumes from the Barnes and Noble at Broadway and 82nd in Manhattan.

The boundaries between a source (whether direct or indirect) and a