

Analyzing “age of exploration documents” as a Primary Source

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Historical events and time periods from the past are fascinating to learn about, especially if the phenomena being studied can be proved. Past events come alive during study sessions when primary sources are incorporated into the lesson. A primary source can be any document, letter, photograph, or any other account that can be used to provide first-hand evidence that can be an event in the past. Examining the primary source is still the best way to understand a past function. The validity of the information provided by the primary source mostly depends on the interpretation given to the message it conveys. To interpret a primary source correctly, historians are required to carefully study the document itself and the era from which it comes.

In the middle of the 15th century, a couple of circumstances stimulated the Europeans to seek new routes. Kings, seamen, scholars, and commoners started to explore new paths to carry out trade and adventure. Henry the Navigator, a Portuguese, initiated the Age of Discovery. His motives were curiosity about the world and interest in new ship designs and navigational aids, which drove him to search for a sea route east from south to Cathay. Profitable trade was also another motive that sent him to sail along the east and south of the African coast. Numerous other expeditions were made throughout the 15th century to explore Africa. Other Portuguese explorers reached Senegal and crossed the desert, discovering both the Nile and Congo Rivers. They made voyages to the Cape Verde Islands and Gambia. The career of these Portuguese seamen brought the colonization of the Madeira Islands and the traversal of the African coast to Sierra Leone. King John II of Portugal ordered the African coast to be explored with the intention of finding a route to India. The King established two courses that were to be followed by the navigators. In 1497, a Portuguese captain, Vasco da Gama, successfully sailed to the west coast of India. He moved around the Cape of Storms (Cape of Good Hope) and the beach of East Africa (Foner, 20).

Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, initiated the sea route west to Cathay in 1492, where he sailed from Spain towards the west, and it is convinced that he reached China. He made other voyages and explored the islands of “the Indies.” On his third voyage, he entered the Gulf of Paria (now known as Venezuela) and sent a report to Spain in which he said, “a very great continent...until today unknown”. In the early 16th century, Columbus made his fourth voyage, in which he explored the Central American coast from Honduras to Darien. He was the first European to relate with the American Indians in 1492. He wrote back to the Authorities back in Spain, telling them about his encounter with the natives (Foner, 21). He took some of the natives as servants. Columbus also suggested that the American Indians could make perfect slaves and even they could be easily converted to Christianity. His success and contributions made other sailors from Spain, Italy, France, and Portugal sail to the West as traders and missionaries (Foner, 23). The Europeans settled in the

lands in which they sailed and started to influence the natives of these lands to change and adapt their culture, such as by converting to Christianity. As time went, the European settlers colonized the areas which they had settled.

Historians have uncovered an article by Christopher Columbus in which he describes his first contact with the American Indians. Columbus narrates how people came to the beach and how he started to relate to the natives. There are several aspects of Columbus' story that make it a valid source. First, his description of the Americans connects totally with our idea of how the natives would be. He says that they approached the beach naked just as their mother bore them. He also added that they were well-built, tall, and had coarse hair. His description of their weapons, where he said, "their spears are made of wood," also proves that he was talking about the natives (Christopher Columbus, Age of Exploration Documents, 4). Another aspect that makes this source valid is that, in this context, Columbus addressed the authorities in Spain, requesting permission to take some of the natives as servants. Christopher Columbus was also a well-known sailor who discovered the American continent, and the fact that he gave this story makes it a valid source of information about past events. The Native American Indians had no religion, and this is also in agreement with what Columbus stated as he addressed the Spanish authority. He said that the natives would easily be converted to Christianity (Christopher Columbus, Age of Exploration Documents, 4). Columbus' first encounter with the American natives is a good and valid primary source that can be used for a historical study.

The story of Spanish Explorer Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca is another perfect example of a primary source used in history. The explorer narrated his experience in India, and based on some facts from his story, we can analyze its validity. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's description of the Indian culture of dancing and celebrating feasts collaborates with the current Indian culture, and this can be used as proof that Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was indeed in India those very many years ago. His story also stated that India had many animals, such as deer, fowl, and many other animals. He continued to say that the Indians were so accustomed to running that they would run after a deer the whole day (Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, Age of Exploration Documents, 5). Despite the many changes that have occurred in the Indian culture, some observations that Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca made are still evident in modern-day India. The above facts prove that he was actually in India, and his story can be used by historians to study past events in India.

The drawing by Europeans showing the Smallpox Outbreak in India in the year 1585 is yet another source of historical knowledge. In the picture, sick Indians can be seen lying on a mat with their skin severely affected by the disease. The kind of attire worn by the Indians in the drawing resembles the Indian culture, and the complexity of the people drawn is a representation of the Indians. These two pieces of evidence prove that the picture was a representation of the actual happenings in India. The level of art used in the drawing is ancient and resembles many other ancient European drawings (European Drawing, Age of Exploration Documents, 6).

The level of confidence placed in a primary source depends on the ability to find proof that the cause really resembles, narrates, or describes what happened in the past. Through experience and skills,

historians have worked on many primary sources to find the truth in them. The above examples are excellent examples of primary source analysis and some of the methods used to analyze the cause. Facts like who the author of the message is, who the intended audience was, the message being conveyed, and the purpose of the letter have come up as some of the ways to evaluate a vital source. Comparing the modern-day culture of a community with the culture described by a reference is another way of analyzing a primary source.

Works Cited

Foner, E., 2013. *Give Me Liberty! An American History: Seagull Fourth Edition* (Vol. 1). WW Norton & Company.