HISTORY NEA

Secondary Sources

What are secondary sources?

Historians' accounts are usually called 'secondary sources', in order to distinguish them from the 'primary' source material on which they are based. However, 'secondary source' is not an entirely satisfactory term. It suggests a hierarchy of importance, with 'secondary' writings ranking less highly than 'primary' sources. This can lead the unwary student into assuming that primary sources must somehow be a more direct - and therefore more accurate - reflection of the past. In fact, primary source material may tell us relatively little until a historian has been able to explain what it is, how it fits into its wider context, and how its contents can shed light on that context.

That being said, we should subject secondary sources to the same scrutiny as we do primary material. Historical writing is as much a reflection of its author's personality and outlook, and of the circumstances in which she or he lived, as any other form of writing. To paraphrase the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, historians do not leave their own personalities at the door of their studies, the way one would shed a wet raincoat. Indeed, historical writing can also provide 'primary' evidence of the time when it was written - just think, for example, of the writings of Edward Gibbon or AJP Taylor, historians whose works can provide rich evidence of the concerns of their own periods.

It is also true that different audiences can interpret historical writing in very different ways. The highly subjective nature of history writing - selecting the material, constructing the argument and choosing the language in which to communicate it - and the equally subjective process of reading history have led postmodernist scholars to declare the writing of history to be a largely pointless task, which can make little claim to objectivity or to giving an 'accurate' or 'truthful' picture of the past. Historians have responded robustly to this attack on their profession: after all, the logic of the postmodernist case would undermine any form of ‘factual’ writing (certainly, as historians of science have pointed out, much the same accusations of subjectivity can be made against scientists). Indeed, it would be very difficult to think what an entirely objective historical account might look like, for even the most apparently neutral and factual account, such as one might see in an encyclopedia, carries its own interpretation which others might contest - as the original designers of Wikipedia, to name but one example, clearly understood...

1. Summarise the arguments in this extract

The Hidden Meanings of Historical Writing

The subjective nature of historical writing may make for an agreeable discussion into the night, but it can be alarming for the student needing to use history books to get accurate notes. It is important, therefore, to be aware that historical writing works on at least two levels:

a) an outline of what happened – the 'facts' or 'the story'

b) an interpretation of those facts – the historian's opinion

This does not mean, however, that these two aspects are clearly divided in the text, nor that those parts which fall into a) are somehow factual or neutral: remember that the very language in which a) is expressed is itself a reflection of the interpretation in b). For example, a historian might write an apparently straightforward 'factual' statement:

2. ' The Battle of Hastings took place in 1066.'

3. Two Ways of Presenting a Crusade

Perhaps more than any other historical period, the way in which the medieval crusades are viewed and described has undergone a radical change as modern western society has evolved and diversified. For much of the twentieth century western historians of the crusades worked within a broadly Christian social framework, in which the concept of crusade was a familiar paradigm, used in a wide range of contexts: ‘crusades’ would be launched against crime, squalor or poverty. The decline in the role of religion in western European society in the late twentieth century and especially the growth of substantial Muslim communities in Europe and North America has inevitably forced a rethinking of the crusades. Where once they were seen essentially in heroic terms, they tend now to be seen as aberrations, which demand apologies to the Muslim world by the modern leaders of the Church.

This shift in public emphasis places the academic historian of the period in a difficult position. History rarely fits into such simplistic patterns and the crusades are no exception. Modern critics who compare the crusades to later European imperialism and who assume that the crusaders were out for material gain can be discomfited to learn that many crusaders who settled in the east were financially ruined by the experience. These two extracts look at one event, the fall of Jerusalem to the knights of the First Crusade, in 1099, in the words of two different Cambridge historians, who reflect something of the shift in approach that has taken place in recent years.

4. Sir Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades

Runciman was a scholar of formidable learning. He was a leading scholar in the history of Byzantium, still a field with which relatively few historians are familiar and to which a short introduction might be useful. Byzantium was the name of the Greek city upon which the Roman emperor Constantine founded his eastern capital, Constantinople. The name Byzantium survived and was often used for the Roman empire in the east, especially after the fall of the western Roman Empire. The Byzantine empire, though officially known as Roman, was essentially Greek in its culture and language; it was also a major centre of Christianity. It covered the Balkans in southern Europe, modern Turkey and the middle east, all of which, especially Turkey, also had a substantial Greek and Christian thread to its culture. By the eleventh century, however, the Byzantines were under pressure from the Turks, spreading westwards from central Asia and bringing Islam with them. In 1071 the Turks invaded the Byzantine Empire, defeating and killing the Byzantine emperor at the Battle of Manzikert. His successor called on western Europe for help to drive the Turks from his empire and that call was the origin of the crusades.

Runciman was unusual in his interest in Byzantium: most historians of the Crusades concentrated on the western Europeans, with some specialising in the Arab side of the story. He then applied his knowledge of the Byzantines to his three-volume history of the crusades which he published in the 1950s. It rapidly became a popular-seller, not least because of Runciman’s dramatic narrative style. His mastery of the detail meant that his narrative was populated by a huge cast of characters, many of whose names will have sounded unfamiliar to his readers, and he revelled in the sort of intricate, complex plots which are often described as ‘Byzantine’.

Extract

In this extract Runciman describes the scene as the crusaders, after a long and difficult siege, finally break through into the city of Jerusalem.

***The Crusaders, maddened by so great a victory after much suffering, rushed through the streets and into the houses and mosques killing all that they met, men, women and children alike. All that afternoon and all through the night the massacre continued. Tancred’s banner was no protection to the refugees in the mosque of al-Aqsa. Early next morning a band of Crusaders forced an entry into the mosque and slew everyone. When Raymond of Aguilers later that morning went to visit the Temple area he had to pick his way through corpses and blood that reached up to his knees.1***

***The Jews of Jerusalem fled in a body to their chief synagogue. But they were held to have aided the Moslems; and no mercy was shown to them. The building was set on fire and they were all burnt within.2***

***The massacre at Jerusalem profoundly impressed all the world. No one can say how many victims it involved; but it emptied Jerusalem of its Moslem and Jewish inhabitants. Many even of the Christians were horrified by what had been done; and amongst the Moslems, who had been ready hitherto to accept the Franks as another factor in the tangled politics of the time, there was henceforward a clear determination that the Franks must be driven out. It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that recreated the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Moslem could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.***

Steven Runciman A History of the Crusades vol.I (Cambridge University Press 1988; first published 1951) pp.286-7

1Raymond of Aguilers XX p.300; Gesta Francorum X 38 pp.204-6; letter of Daimbert in Hagenmeyer op.cit. p.171; Abu’l Feda op.cit. p.4 and Ibn al-Athir op.cit. pp.198-9 describe the massacres. The latter gives Raymond the credit of having kept his word. See also Ibn al-Qālanisī Damascus Chronicle p.48.

2Ibn al-Qālanisī loc.cit.

1. What happens in this extract?

b. Commentary

This is a vivid description of an appalling event, and although Runciman avoids giving gruesome details of any individual’s fate, the general picture is fairly clear, especially when he describes Raymond of Aguilers picking his way through corpses with blood coming up to his knees. On the face of it, this is a straightforward narrative account, similar in style to a medieval chronicle: Runciman appears to be telling us the events without comment; in fact his view comes through very clearly from his choice of language. Although for most of the passage we are seeing events through Runciman’s eyes as they unfurl, at the end we are reminded that, unlike his characters, he knows what will follow and he uses his hindsight to invite the reader to condemn the killings even more strongly.

c. Language

d. Sources

5. Jonathan Riley-Smith, The Crusades: A Short History

Jonathan Riley-Smith is one of the country’s leading historians of the Crusades. Like other scholars in the field, he has had to face up to the question of how one follows a popular and influential historian like Runciman. Modern historians of the Crusades have looked in greater depth than was fashionable in Runciman’s day at angles like the economics of Crusade or at Crusading beyond the Middle East; however modern historians have a duty to tell the story of the events just as much as Runciman did.

Extract

In this extract from Riley-Smith’s account written for a general readership, we again see the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders.

***Jerusalem was, like Antioch, far too large to be surrounded. The crusaders at first concentrated most of their strength against the western wall, but then divided their forces between the western section of the northern wall, where Robert of Normandy, Robert of Flanders, Godfrey of Bouillon and Tancred took up positions, and Mount Zion to the south, where Raymond of St Gilles, bitterly at odds with Godfrey over the desertion of Tancred and probably of others of his following, took his post. For a time the siege went badly, despite the arrival of Genoese and English ships at Jaffa, and an expedition to the north into Samaria, which provided wood and other materials for the construction of two siege-towers, a battering-ram and some catapults. Meanwhile news arrived of the march of an Egyptian relief force that everyone, not least the garrison of Jerusalem, had been expecting. On 8 July, following the instructions transmitted by a visionary, a great penitential procession of crusaders wound its way from holy place to holy place outside the city walls and gathered to hear sermons on the Mount of Olives. The 14th was spent filling in the ditch to the south and by evening Raymond of St Gilles’s tower was closing on the wall, but on the 15th Godfrey of Bouillon’s men, who had switched their point of attack eastwards to level ground slightly to the east of the present-day Herod’s Gate, succeeded in bridging the gap between their tower and the wall. Two knights from Tournai were the first across, followed by the Lorrainers. The trickle became a torrent as crusaders poured over the wall and through a breach already made by the ram, some making for the Temple area and some beyond, down to the south-west corner where the Muslims defending against Raymond of St Gilles withdrew. Jerusalem was given over to the sack.***

Jonathan Riley-Smith The Crusades: a Short History (Cambridge University Press 1987) p.34

1. What happens in this extract?

b. Commentary

This is a vivid and detailed narrative account, written for a general audience. It is very much about the strategy of the siege: there is much talk of attacks from the west, north or south and the final breakthrough comes when Godfrey slightly changes his angle of attack. By the end, we get a day-by-day account of what happened when and on which exact part of the walls. Riley-Smith points out the divisions and splits within the Crusader camp: Raymond of St Gilles is 'bitterly at odds' with Godfrey of Bouillon, and one senses a certain rivalry between the two men in the description of how their different angles of attack crept closer to the city walls. The strategic detail rather squeezes out the other angles: one would like to know more about the visionary who persuaded the Crusaders to make a penitential procession around the city and to learn more about what this procession did.

c. Language

In many ways this is narrative history of the old style, with much use, appropriately enough, of military language: ‘the crusaders at first concentrated most of their strength against the western wall’ and their various leaders take up their positions and posts. The description becomes florid towards the end of the passage, when, after the first few knights have passed through the breach ‘the trickle became a torrent’ with Crusaders pouring over the wall. However, perhaps the biggest surprise comes right at the end of this passage when the violence that Runciman described in such detail is encapsulated in the phrase ‘Jerusalem was given over to the sack’. This is a euphemism much used by historians as a way of indicating what happened without having to go into details; it should be remembered that Riley-Smith is trying to cover the whole history of the Crusades in a single book, whereas Runciman had three volumes at his disposal. Even so, it is worth considering the effectiveness of such phrases on conveying the reality of events in the past.

d. Sources