

GROUP ASSIGNMENT 1: Using a Primary Source

Written records provide us with useful information about historical events, everyday life, and the beliefs of different peoples. Historians use two types of written records: primary sources and secondary sources.

Primary sources are first-hand accounts based on the experiences of people who were involved in an event. Eyewitness accounts, government documents, treaties, and letters are primary sources. **Secondary sources** are second-hand accounts based on the writings or evidence of others. Textbooks and encyclopaedias are secondary sources.

Some primary sources are written for a particular reason so the writer might not tell a completely objective story. Therefore, they have to be judged carefully.

The following excerpt is from the *Histories of Ammianus Marcellinus*, written about 378 CE. Ammianus was a soldier who had often visited Rome. Use these steps to evaluate the excerpt as a primary source.

Procedure:

- 1). Read the introduction as a whole class (see above).
- 2). As a group read Marcellinus's *Histories* (see next page).
- 3). Then as a group discuss the following questions.

a. Distinguish what information is being given. a). What aspects of Roman life does the writer describe? b). What does the writer say about the clothing worn by Romans? c). How did old poor Romans spend their time?

b. Distinguish between fact and opinion. A fact is something that has actually happened; it can be proven or observed. An opinion is a judgement that reflects a person's belief. a). What three facts about life in Rome can you identify in this excerpt? b). What is the writer's opinion of the amusements of Romans?

c. Evaluate the reliability of the source. a). How could the fact that Ammianus was a visitor to Rome have affected his view of the capital? b). What aspects of Roman life does Ammianus seem to ignore? c). Would you consider this a reliable description of life in Rome? Why or why not?

- 4). Then individually compose an answer (minimum 100 words in length) to the following question. Ensure you appeal to both relevant logic and evidence in the composition of your answer. Submit your answer using *Google* docs sharing read/write

permissions with the classroom teacher (rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca).

d. Use the source to draw conclusions about a historical development. What generalizations about the decline of Rome can be made from this source?

From the *Histories* by Marcellinus

Rome is still looked on as the queen of the earth, and the name of the Roman people is respected. But the magnificence of Rome is defaced by the thoughtless conduct of a few who fell away into error and vice. Some men think they can become immortal by having statues made of them—as if they could be rewarded after death by being cast as bronze figures that have no sense or feeling rather than by striving to perform upright and honorable actions. And they are even eager to have their statues plated with gold.

Others place greater importance on having a couch higher than usual or splendid clothing. They toil and sweat under a vast burden of cloaks which are fastened to their necks by many clasps.

The whirlpool of banquets and other luxuries I shall pass over lest I go too far. Many people drive their horses recklessly over the flint-paved city streets. They drag behind them huge numbers of slaves, like bands of robbers. As for the lower and poorer classes, some spend the whole night in the wine shops. Some lie concealed in the shady arcades of the theaters. They play at dice so eagerly as to quarrel over them. Such pursuits as these prevent anything worth mentioning from being done in Rome.