

## GROUP ASSIGNMENT 1: Using Primary Sources

### Procedure:

- 1). Read the introduction as a whole class (see immediately below). Follow all instructions exactly as presented.
- 2). As a group read Marcellinus's *Histories* (page 2).
- 3). Now as a group *discuss* the related discussion questions (pages 3 and 4), e.g. sections i, ii, and iii.
- 4). Then on your own answer the response question (see iv) located on page 4.

### Introduction

Written records provide useful information about historical events and what life was like in the past. Historians make use of two types of written records—primary sources and secondary sources.

**Primary sources are first-hand accounts based on the experiences of people who were directly involved in an event.** Eyewitness accounts, government documents, treaties, and letters are primary sources. **Secondary sources are second-hand accounts which are either a response to primary sources or talking to people who were not directly involved in a historical event.** Textbooks and encyclopaedias are examples of secondary sources.

Primary and secondary sources are always affected by **bias**. Bias is neither good nor bad; rather, as readers of history we identify bias when it is present and whether or not it makes the source inherently unreliable or problematic.

**By definition bias exists when a particular writer favors some things but not others for apparent personal reasons.** For example if a wealthy person writes a history critical of the poor, we should evaluate whether or not the wealthy person's criticism is valid or just a form of prejudice. Again, criticism in and of itself is not a bad thing *per se*.

However, since we are discerning readers (and not mindless consumers of information) we want to be thoughtful and considered in what we regard as genuine evidence.

How do we gain an appreciation for the effect a writer's bias has on the validity of a source? We research the writer's background and experiences. In so doing, we gain insight into why the writer makes particular claims *and* if they are trustworthy.

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

### **From the *Histories* by Ammianus**

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.

### Discussion Questions

#### i. 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?

**ii. 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 what amuses most Romans?

**iii. Evaluate the reliability of the source.** Use the Internet to conduct a quick background check of Ammianus. In your research, try to find out:

- Where was he born? Where did he grow up? Was he educated? What did he do for a living? What relevant experiences did he have making him a potential trustworthy authority on Rome's decline?

Now discuss the following questions:

- 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). In your opinion, why does he seem to ignore these aspects?

iv). Now as individuals write an answer (minimum 100 words in length) to the response question below (see d). In your answer, make direct response to the short article you just discussed as a group. Submit your answer using *Google Docs*. Name your document History 10 Assignment 1. Share your document with the classroom teacher ([rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca](mailto:rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca)) giving them full editing privileges. The deadline for the response is the day of the unit end exam.

**d. Response Question: use the source to draw conclusions about a historical development.**

What did Ammianus ultimately conclude about Rome's decline? What are the benefits and/or problems of using only a single source?

In your answer consider discussing the following features associated with writer's bias:

- Does the writer use overly positive or overly negative language about the subject?
- Does the writer use emotionally charged language about the subject?
- Does the writer use vague or generalized language about the subject?
- Does the writer omit any important facts?
- Does the writer add information and evidence that seems unnecessary just to boost their point?