**Primary vs. Secondary Source(s)**

The exact definition of “primary” and “secondary” sources is difficult to pin down, but I submit that virtually all definitions fail, because they neglect/omit one crucial element.

Example: Is the image below (an excerpt from my AP World History textbook, *Traditions & Encounters*) a primary source or a secondary source? (I’m referring to the page as a whole, not the individual pictures.)

Most, if not all of us would answer “Secondary source.” Respectfully, I disagree. Not that I think the excerpt is a primary source, either. Rather, I think the question of whether a document is a primary or secondary source is contingent on the question the source is being used to answer.

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| **Question:**How did classical societies form?**Answer:**Document = secondary source. |  | **Question:**How was world history taught in 2014?**Answer:**Document = primary source. |

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The point is: The question drives the interpretation of evidence.

Documents in and of themselves are not inherently primary or secondary.

They take on that characteristic only if/when they are used to answer questions.

Ask a different question, get a different answer.



**Moral: Ask good questions.**