Primary Document Interpretation

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History 1012: Introduction to World History

The purpose of this paper is to allow you to act as a historian, confront a primary document yourself, and come to some conclusions based on the document. We hope that by doing this you will gain a better sense of how historians work. We would like to encourage you to use your imaginations in this paper.

First, choose a document as instructed by your TA from among those listed in the syllabus for Week 3. Then, in an essay of around 2-3 pages, analyze the document addressing some of the following sorts of questions: (Note that all questions are probably not appropriate for all kinds of documents. Your Teaching Assistant will have further instructions regarding this assignment.)

1) Who wrote the document? What kind of a perspective does it represent? Who was its intended audience?

2) Why was the document written? What sort of function did it serve? Was it perhaps written in response to a particular kind of problem? If you suspect that it was, what might the problem have been?

3) What can the document tell us about society at the time it was written? (Be sure to pay attention to perspective here – is the document written from the perspective of and "insider" or and "outsider" to the society in question? What relationship does the author have to the society being described?) What can it tell us about social norms and expectations of the time of its composition?

We do not expect you to do extra research to interpret the document. But we do expect you to make use of our lectures, class discussion and assigned readings in interpreting the document. Read between the lines of the document -- use your imagination. Good luck and have fun.

Due date: Wednesday October 2 in lecture class!