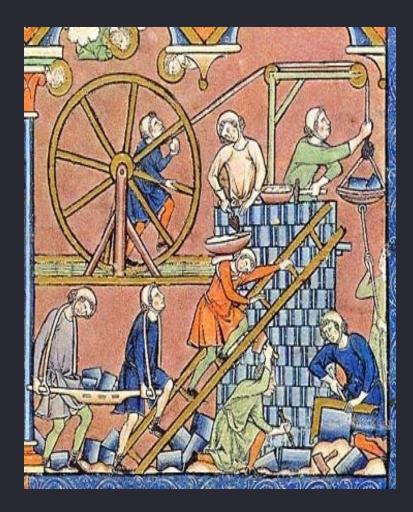# THE RESEARCH QUEST: Types of Sources and How to Use Them

Detail of a miniature of a hermit at work on a manuscript, from the Estoire del Saint Graal, France
(Saint-Omer or Tournai?), c. 1315 – 1325, Royal MS 14 E III, f. 6v

USING SOURCES

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While it can be useful to know the difference between types of sources, just like it can be useful to know the difference between different building materials, they mainly useful because of what you can do with them.

TERTIARY SOURCES: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Tertiary sources are like a map: use them to get a broad overview of your topic and for contextual and background information.

This will help spark questions such as "in what ways did the English Civil War affect the CofE's response to Wesley?" or "Why was the 13th cent RCC able to successfully integrate reform movements like the Dominicans and Franciscans, whereas the 16th cent RCC was unable to do so?"

PRIMARY SOURCES:
DATA OBTAINED THROUGH INFORMED, CLOSE READING AND DETAILED ANALYSIS

Woman armed with crossbow draws a bead on knights in an elephant castle. One of the knights seems to be shrugging. Smithfield decretals. 1300-1340

Woman armed with crossbow draws a bead on knights in an elephant castle. One of the knights seems to be shrugging. Smithfield decretals. 1300-1340

Primary sources are foundational; they provide basis upon which you build your thesis.

This requires close reading, informed by the background and contextual information gleaned from tertiary sources, and detailed analysis.

This will prompt questions such as "what is that elephant doing there?" "why does she want to shoot it with a crossbow?" "what is the illustrator trying to depict, or say?"

SECONDARY SOURCES: CONVERSATION PARTNERS

USING SOURCES IS WHAT MAKES RESEARCH A CONVERSATION INSTEAD OF A MONOLOGUE
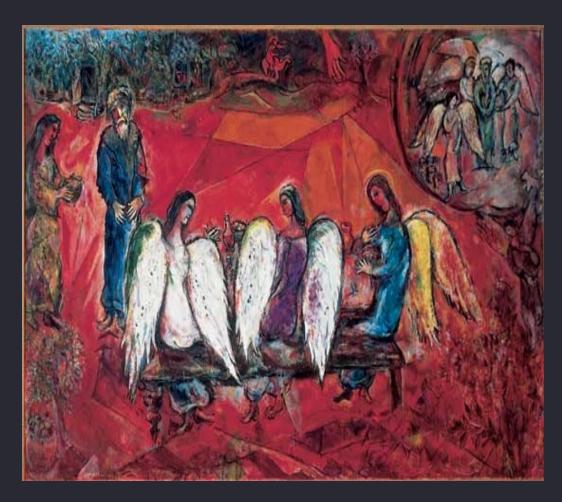
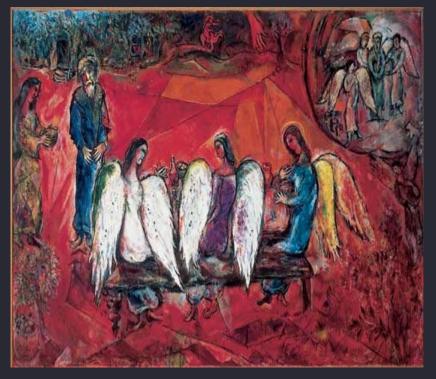## USING SOURCES IS WHAT MAKES RESEARCH A CONVERSATION INSTEAD OF A MONOLOGUE

It is OK – even necessary – to critically analyze the writings of authorities in your field; research is not a matter of humbly groveling before lofty immortals, nor should it be a thoughtless exercise of revolutionary iconoclasm

RESEARCH IS A CONVERSATION

Marc Chagall, Abraham et les trois anges, 1966, Saint-paul-de-vence, France

RESEARCH IS A CONVERSATION

Marc Chagall, Abraham et les trois anges, 1966, Saint-paul-de-vence, France

Like a good conversation, research is a give-and-take process of

- looking at the information provided by primary sources,

- expressing your own ideas, and

- allowing others (other secondary sources) to offer their own interpretations in ways that either challenge or confirm you ideas, compelling you to re-evaluate them
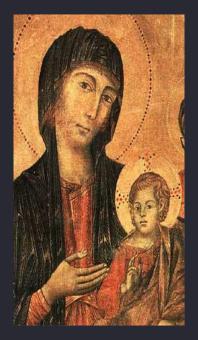
AD FONTES – TO THE SOURCE

This is why it is essential to base your research on direct interaction with primary sources, and to keep going back to your primary sources, so when you enter into the conversation with other researchers and interpreters, you will have something to say, and a basis for saying it.

YOUR GOAL IS OFFERING A FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION OF YOUR TOPIC, BASED ON YOUR SOURCES, GUIDED BY YOUR THESIS

Fra Philippo Lippi,
*Madonna-col-Bambino,*1466-69

Botticelli,
Modonna of the Magnificat,
1475-1480

Cimabue,
Santa Trinita Madonna, 1290

Raphael
Small Cowper Madonna,
1505

Fra Philippo Lippi,
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Small Cowper Madonna, 1505

Writing a research paper is sort of
like a work of representational art:

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Writing a research paper is sort of like a work of representational art:

Primary sources are the "subject" – they are "what" you are representing - and your paper itself is your representation – both description and interpretation – of this "subject."

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Madonna-col-Bambino, 1466-69

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Cimabue,
Santa Trinita Madonna, 1290

Raphael
Small Cowper Madonna, 1505

Each of these Madonnas is an interpretation, and each draws upon and reflects the historical-cultural presuppositions – dress, ethnicity, etc. – of the artist, yet each also represents the subject: the Christ Child and his Mother, the Virgin Mary.

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Your paper, your interpretation of the primary sources, both reflects your own historical-cultural context and presuppositions, and strives to faithfully represent your subject as you are able to gain access to it by means of primary sources.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: AN EXAMPLE

Until the 20th century, the scholarly consensus seems to have been that the Crusades were primarily motivated by religious zeal, manifest in violence toward members of other religions. Under the influence of Marxism, Jones and other 20th century scholars began to appreciate the economic factors that may have motivated some to go on crusade. For example, Rameous compares the economic activity evidenced in Venice before and after the period of the crusades (11th-13th centuries). However, based on close readings of contemporary chronicles and first-hand accounts, more recent scholars have found that neither economics, nor religious hatred were primary motivations. Rather, the primary impetus seems to have been piety, and the crusaders largely thought of themselves as pilgrims and crusades as a form of penance. As Flemmish knight Guy de'Orlean relates to his personal chronicler . . .

ASK (FOR HELP), AND YE SHALL RECEIVE

Your librarians are here to help!

David Schmersal
dschmersal@austinseminary.edu

Contact us any time at libraryiq@austinseminary.edu with any questions.