

### How to Read a Historical Source

- Who?
  - Determine the author(s), if we know. Is there debate about who wrote it?
    - Take note of any biographical details we know about the author, and think about what expertise, biases, and limitations the author might be bringing to this work.
  - Determine the intended audience.
    - Is the author speaking to “insiders” or “outsiders”? Social superiors or inferiors? Friends, enemies, or something in between?
- What?
  - Source type: sermon, letter, saint’s life, church history, legal document.
    - Every genre has its own conventions: what parts of this source meet those expectations? Are there any surprises?
  - Material: papyrus, manuscript, wood, stone, etc.
    - Does the material affect the form or preservation of the message?
- When?
  - History: When was this text written and/or circulated?
    - What were the political, social, and economic circumstances at the time and how might they affect this work?
  - Biography: At what time in his/her life did the author write this text?
    - Is he/she in a position of influence? In exile?
- Where?
  - In what country/city/community was this text written?
    - What was the geography, history and culture of this place? Was the text circulated further than the local community?
  - In what language is the text?
    - What “statement” did it make when a person wrote or spoke in this language at the time the text was written? What cultural or political allegiances was one declaring when using this language?
    - Is the language you are reading the original language of its composition? Was it even preserved in the original language?
- Why?
  - Short term: what was the author trying to accomplish?
    - Is the author defending him/herself or a community against an accusation? Is there a specific scandal or event to which the author is responding?
  - Long term: was this text part of the author’s larger goal?
    - Is it an excerpt of a larger work? Is it a small piece that has thematic connections to the author’s other works?

Further Reading

Burrus, Virginia. "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome." *The Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (1991): 229–48.

Cooper, Kate. "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 150–64.

Dixon, Suzanne. *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres, and Real Life*. London: Duckworth, 2001.

Knust, Jennifer. *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Richlin, Amy. *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.