

## Using Primary Sources

When you look back in history, you find all sorts of remnants which have been left behind for us to study. In some of the missions, you can see old decrees and treaties issued by the Bey, and you can see photographs of old buildings. There are even remnants of Tunisian history in Tunisian Arabic.

Primary sources though are usually taken to mean written or photographic documents. They may be diaries, newspaper accounts, photographs, letters or indeed anything which has been left behind by people who are no longer alive.

We are used to reading such documents for information. A history text book gives us lots of information. However, imagine looking at the Treaty of Ksar Said. Rather than just looking at it as an information document, we can ask questions about why it exists, and what clues it gives us about who wrote it, when it was made, and what else was happening at the time it was signed. For example, asking students the questions below can make them engage in historical thinking:

Who is the author?

When did they write it?

What events were happening at the time?

Why was it written?

Did everyone who signed it agree with its contents?

How did different people's viewpoints influence what was written?

What conclusions can you make from it?

When students make inferences or conclusions, they are using the primary source as evidence. In any inquiry, we should try to use more than one source of evidence to corroborate a conclusion. For example, you may ask students about similarities between two sources, why a source confirms a conclusion, or how a source may help to extend or challenge a conclusion. Making students explain their thinking is important. You can help them to do so by using starter sentences, such as:

From this document, we can conclude...

This sentence suggests that...

It is probably the case that...because...and I know that because...

This document supports / contradicts the evidence of the other document because...

This source goes even further than the other source because...

It is also important for students to judge how relevant a source is to the ideas they are thinking about. You can ask them to explain why a source is relevant or valuable, or justify their choice of documents. We don't ask them to do this much in the missions, but as you go on to use historical thinking in your classroom, you can do so on your own.