

HOW TO COPE WITH HISTORICAL SOURCES?

Historical sources do not speak to us just by themselves. To find out what they can tell us, we have to follow a couple of steps called the “historical critical method”. It was set up by German historians Leopold Ranke and Gustav Droysen in the second half of the 19th century and refined and complemented by many scholars ever since.

The following methodical steps have to be adapted to individual questions and sources. Complete application of the methods is not required and not desirable. Aim at a conclusive argumentation and apply only the methodical steps needed.

I Introduction

I.1 Three ways of reading

Historical sources can and must be read in various ways, depending on the question and insight interests:

- (1) “according to the intention“: to find out what the author wanted to convey to his/her contemporary target readers/audiences
? What does the text want to communicate to its readership or effect with them?
- (2) “between the lines“ – to reconstruct the author’s and the readers’ physical and intellectual world
? What did they take for granted? How do they unconsciously refer to their cultural and social background?
- (3) “against the grain“ – to reconstruct ideas and events that the source is not in favor of or tries to hide
? Which events or views can be reconstructed behind the evaluations?

I.2 Asking, Searching, Finding

Asking

A precise formulation of a question or a thesis prevents historians from just retelling what they find in their sources. Questions can arise from the historical situation or from contemporary discussions. History is the past in the present.

Searching and Finding

According to the question or thesis, source materials have to be searched and selected. They can be as different as texts, pictures, buildings or tools. The same materials can be used for various questions in various contexts. To know which sources are suitable to tackle which questions, thorough analysis is necessary.

II Analysis and Interpretation of Texts

II.1 Origin and Context of the source

- Spatial and temporal conditions of its making
- The author's social environment, authenticity

Method / Focus	Question/Goal	Procedure
Evaluation of Authenticity	Is the source written by the author it is attributed to? Is the source really what you think it to be after its form?	Discuss information given by the introduction of the edition and research literature as well as the source itself.
Dating/Localization	When and where was the text written?	Discuss relevant information from research literature, if possible, include your insights from the source. Mention only relevant points in terms of your question!
Historical context	Which events, structures and people where important in the environment of the text?	Find first hints in the source, use research literature to contextualize the information.

II. 2 Physical appearance and shape of the source

- Physical appearance of the source, publication and transmission
- shape and literary genre

Method / Focus	Question/Goal	Procedure
Text and transmission	Is the text correctly transmitted? Rekonstruction of the/an original text by comparing various manuscripts	Consult the introduction of the applicable critical edition, read the apparatus for crucial passages
Revision	Has the text been revised over time? If yes, by whom, when and why? How did the content and the pragmatics of the text change?	If so, divide different layers of the text and analyze them separately.

<p>Shape and genre</p>	<p>Does the source belong to any established genre? Which features do characterize this genre?</p> <p>Which signals does the genre send to the target audience? What can we say about the pragmatics of the genre?</p>	<p>Read the introduction of the edition. Consult research literature to learn about specific features of the genre.</p> <p>Identify this features in the source and interpret them. Include reasoning on author and target audience.</p>
------------------------	--	--

II. 3 Content and arguments of the source

- Which statements are found and how are they used? (content)
 - To which intellectual contexts or cultural backgrounds belong the author's thoughts?
 - Intentions of the author and target reader / target audience
- Information comes from the source itself, can be compared to previous work in research literature

Method / Focus	Question/Goal	Procedure
<p>Syntax</p>	<p>Which are the argumentative and narrative structures of the text? Are there any frequently used phrases or vocabulary?</p>	<p>Set up a synopsis or a mindmap.</p>
<p>Rhetorics</p>	<p>Which idioms, expressions and stylistic devices shape the text? Which means are used to guide and influence the target audience?</p>	<p>Mark idioms and stylistic devices and interpret them according to the contemporary habits.</p>
<p>Semantics</p>	<p>Which linguistic background does the text have? Which motifs linguistic pictures does it show? And which does it show particularly frequently? Are these typical for a time or a genre? Are any typical elements of the genre missing?</p>	<p>Set up a list with keywords and leading motifs. Visualize semantic fields.</p>
<p>Tradition / Intertextuality</p>	<p>Which biblical, philosophical, theological and historiographical sources can be found in the background of the text? How are they used?</p>	<p>Find quotations and allusions with the help of the critical apparatus. Compare them with the original text and find your own interpretations.</p>

Tendencies and judgement	Which historical and theological value judgements can be found in the text? If applicable: Do they change from one revision to another? How do the judgements relate to the authors' aims?	Find implicit and explicit value judgements and interpret them with the help of the results from the previous methodical steps.
Target audience	What did the author want to convey to his/her contemporary target audience? How did he/she define and reach his/her target audience (speech act theory)?	Set up your own statements as a result of all methodical steps as described above. Keep your own question or thesis in mind.

II. 4 Effects of the source – intended and contingent

Authors pursue certain intentions and goals with regard to their contemporary audience, sometimes also with regard to future generations. These intentions are reconstructed in the course of interpretation (intended effect) and placed in their historical context. However, the actual effect of a source is not in the hands of the authors but is determined by the recipients (contingent effect). In the framework of the history of reception we examine with which intentions the texts were read and revised by later generations.

- Your own interpretation combines insights from the previous analysis (II.1/II.2), consult research literature to support your arguments

Method / Focus	Question/Goal	Procedure
Interpretation	What did the author want to convey to his/her contemporary target audience? How did he/she define and reach his/her target audience (speech act theory)?	Set up your own statements as a result of all methodical steps as described above. Keep your own question or thesis in mind.
Historical positioning	In which respects is the source typical for its time? In which respects is it particular?	Consult research literature and optionally other sources from the same environment

Discourse analysis and historical judgement

To evaluate a text adequately, it is essential not to measure it by our contemporary standards. This applies with regard to a methodical level, for example the use of quotations, e.g. from the bible, as well as to time conditioned mindsets and perceptions, such as gender equality, the conceptions of society, family, childhood etc. We have to reconstruct and recollect what *could*

be said and thought in a certain period of time. This happens by comparing sources and by contrasting them to overview research literature on the history of mentality, the history of philosophy and theology and piety and the social history of the time period in question.

Present Relevance of a Source

In Historical Theology, the question of the present relevance and significance of a source can be addressed. The research interest can also be limited to understanding the historical context and placing the source in that context. In order to be able to evaluate the present meaning and relevance of a text, intended and contingent modes of action must be taken into account and the different contexts and discourses (past-present) must be carefully reflected.

References

Christoph Marksches, Arbeitsbuch Kirchengeschichte. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1995 (Neuaufgabe in Vorbereitung).

Martin Meiser / Uwe Kühneweg, Proseminar II Neues Testament – Kirchengeschichte. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1999.

Achim Landwehr, Historische Diskursanalyse, Frankfurt: Campus Einführungen 2008.

III Analysis and Interpretation of Images

In many modern accounts of history, pictures are used as illustrations or for documentation purposes. However, all pictures are not only illustrative, but are themselves sources with an author, with their own formal language, with tendencies, intentions of statements etc., which can and should be analyzed and interpreted.

Basically, all the methodical steps described above are also applied to pictures. Just in the same way as for texts, you have to adapt them to your specific question or thesis. Do you want to find the theological intention, information on historical events or information on the history of piety? Moreover it is important to keep in mind that pictures have their own ontological status and that they should not be understood as mere illustrations of texts. The relationship between text and image is often complex and requires separate analysis and interpretation.

In the following, you are pointed to two different approaches to image analysis, i.e. the iconographic-iconological method, used in art history, and the cluster method, used in literary studies.

III.1 The iconological method by Erwin Panofsky

In 1939 the German art historian Erwin Panofsky published "Studien zur Ikonographie", a standard work on the academic processing of images. He distinguished between an iconographical and an iconological approach. The first was meant to recognize elements, symbols and motifs of a picture, the latter was meant to find a general symbolic meaning, that could be revealed even to the artist or creator of a certain picture. Panofsky's method was widely discussed and refined especially with regard to the recipients as an important group in the process of the making of the meaning of a picture. Now it is conducted as follows:

Method / Focus	Question / Goal	Procedure
Pre-iconographical description	Description: What can we see?	Describe as specifically and as neutrally as possible what you see: How is the picture structured? Which figures, things colors and forms are there?
Iconographical analysis	Content: What is depicted?	Recognize symbols and motifs, if necessary use the bible or research literature. Explain the meaning and the use of the symbols. Explain cultural codes.
Iconological interpretation	Explain aimed meaning: a) What does the picture mean - in different contexts...? - For different recipients...? (principal, artist, viewer) - In different periods of time...? b) Which historical, sociological, cultural and theological information can the picture provide?	Evaluate the results of the iconographical analysis. If known, include information like where the picture hung, what was done with it (object of worshipping etc.) and the possible perspectives of different recipients. Include implicit information. Interpret text-picture relationship (shortened, prolonged, contradictory, distorted...).

III.2 The Cluster Analysis of Image Rhetorics

Kenneth Burke conceptualizes rhetorics as symbolic interaction. Using its means, a speaker is able to animate a collective to act according to his wishes by identification. Rhetorical identification is produced by referring to the convictions and attitudes of the addressed in order to convince them of the speakers' concerns.

In cluster analysis, a kind of table is created in which phrases or imagery is collected around key elements that underline, expand or explain the statement of the same. The cluster analysis proceeds in three steps:

Method / Focus	Question / Goal	Procedure
Determine key elements	Which key elements are on the picture?	Find elements which are either frequent or other wise especially prevalent (size, color, shape)
Set up an analytical cluster	How are the elements related to each other? Which patterns can you discover among the elements?	Include phrases or imagery into a table or mind map; elements are related by being close or similar in shape and color
Interpretation	What do the key elements and their structures tell about the intentions and thoughts of artists, principals and recipients?	Select a couple of key elements for further interpretation. Develop a thesis on depicted intentions and worldviews. Find possible contradictory and ambiguous statements in a picture and interpret them.

References

- Peter Burke, *Augenzeugenschaft. Bilder als historische Quellen*, Berlin 2010.
- Josef Engemann, *Deutung und Bedeutung frühchristlicher Bildwerke*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1997.
- Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism. Exploration and Practice*, Long Grove 2009.
- Johannes Kirchenmann/Frank Schulz, *Bilder erleben und verstehen. Einführung in die Kunstrezeption*, Leipzig 1999.
- Erwin Panofsky, *Sinn und Deutung in der bildenden Kunst*, Köln 1975.
- Erwin Panofsky, *Studien zur Ikonologie*, Köln 1980.
- Gilian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London 2012.

English translation by Sophie Caflisch (state June 2020).