In order to write about the past, historians must find and interpret primary sources. Primary sources can include material objects, archaeological evidence, oral traditions, texts (including official documents, letters, accounts, newspapers), or images. They provide the evidence on which historical narratives rest. This exercise highlights some of the challenges of interpreting original primary sources by asking you to consider the kinds of contextual information you might need in order to interpret such documents accurately, and by asking you to consider what individual documents can and cannot tell you.

The problem Writing about the ancient past poses multiple problems for historians. Among these is the problem of preservation, since many potential sources for historical documentation simply have not survived over thousands of years. For textual sources there is also the problem of language and script, since ancient societies used languages and forms of writing very different from our own. In addition, even when sources have been preserved and historians are able to decipher ancient texts, there is the problem of selectivity—meaning that the sources most likely to have been preserved were those generated by elites.

Fortunately for historians, ancient Egyptian peoples left many textual, material, and archaeological sources behind. The arid climate helped to preserve many textual sources written on papyrus, while the use of stone allowed many monuments to withstand thousands of years of exposure to the elements. Despite the abundance of primary sources, however, much less is known about the lives of everyday Egyptians than is known about Egyptian monarchs, nobles, political elites, and religious authorities.

Historians know that most Egyptians were farmers, but few surviving sources tell their story from their own perspective. In the following two documents, which were generated centuries apart, think about what historians can and cannot infer about the lives of nonelites in ancient Egypt.

The documents Read the documents below, and consider carefully the questions that follow.

Document 1: Stela (inscribed stone) from the tomb of a man named Mentuhotep, from the 11th Dynasty (2133–1991 B.C.E.). Mentuhotep is depicted to the left, with his parents and his son. To the right are Mentuhotep’s other children and his servants.

(1) O ye who live and are upon the earth and who shall pass by this tomb, who love life and hate death, say ye: “May Osiris, head of the Westerners [people of the underworld], glorify Menthotpe.”

(2) Now I was first among my contemporaries, the foreman of my gang [man of the people], one who discovered the statement about which he had been asked, and answered (it) appropriately,

(3) cool(-headed), one who obtained bread in its (due) season, one whose (own) counsel replaced for him a mother at home,
a father making the family fortune (??), and a son of good disposition, one whom his (own) nature instructed as (if it were) a child growing up with his father.

(4) Now although I was become an orphan, I acquired cattle and got oxen (?) and developed my business in goats; I built a house and excavated a (garden-) pond, the priest Menthotpe.

Translated by Alan Gardiner. From W. M. F. Petrie Tombs of the Courtiers and Oxyrhynchos, 1922

Document 2: The following comes from a declaration freeing slaves, from the 20th Dynasty (1185–1070 B.C.E.)

Year 28, 1st month of Inundation, day 10, under the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Rameses (XI). On this day, declaration made by the stable-master Neb-nufe and his wife the musician of Seth of Spermeru Rennufe, to wit:

"We purchased the female slave Dini-huiry and she gave birth to these three children, one male and two female, in all three. And I [i.e., Rennufe] took them and nourished them and brought them up, and I have reached this day with them without their doing evil towards me, but they deal well with me. I having no son or daughter except them. And the stable-master Padiu entered my house and took Ta-Amon-no, their elder sister, to wife, he being related to me and being my younger brother. And I accepted him for her and he is with her at this day.

"Now behold, I have made her a freewoman of the land of Pharaoh, and if she bears either son or daughter, they shall be freemen of the land of Pharaoh in exactly the same way, they being with the stable-master Padiu, this younger brother of mine. And the children shall be with their elder sister in the house of Padiu, this stable-master, this younger brother of mine, and today I make him a son of mine exactly like them."

And she said: "As Amun endures, and the Ruler endures, I (hereby) make the people whom I have put on record freemen of the land of Pharaoh, and if any son, daughter, brother, or sister of their mother and their father should contest their rights, except Padiu this son of mine—for they are indeed no longer with him as servants, but are with him as younger siblings, being freemen of the land of Pharaoh—may a donkey copulate with him and a donkey with his wife, whoever it be that shall call any of them a servant.

"And if I have fields in the country, or if I have any property in the world, or if I have merchants (?), these shall be divided among my four children, Padiu being one of them. And as for these matters of which I have spoken, they are entrusted in their entirety to Padiu, this son of mine, who dealt well with me when I was a widow and when my husband had died."

Before many and numerous witnesses . . . (both men and women).

Alan H. Gardiner, Adoption Extraordinary, JEA 26 (1940) 23–29

Questions

• What can these sources definitively tell you about the lives of the people who produced them? What facts can be gleaned from these sources?

• In Document 1, what is the life story of Mentuhotep, according to the inscription in the stela? Does the inscription indicate that the social mobility described by Mentuhotep was common or uncommon during the 11th Dynasty?

• Also in Document 1, do the figures on the right offer clues about the daily lives of people in Mentuhotep’s household?

• In Document 2, why does Rennufe want to free the three slaves under question? Does this document offer any clues about the experience of slavery in Egypt during the 20th Dynasty?

• Also in Document 2, does this document allow speculation about the status of women in Egypt during the 20th Dynasty? If so, in what ways?

• Taking both documents together, what can each of them tell us about the experience of nonelites in ancient Egypt? What kinds of additional contextual information would you need in order to gauge this question more fully?

• Sources such as these can give historians tantalizing evidence about the lives of everyday people, even in the ancient past. To understand them accurately, however, historians must place individual sources in their larger historical context in order to decide whether they represent broad trends or historical exceptions.