

'What is history?'

Africa and the excitement of sources with Year 7

Many history departments choose to begin their Year 7 curriculum with an introduction to the nature of history and the processes in which historians engage as they develop, refine and substantiate claims about the past. In this article, Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn report on an such an introductory unit, designed with a specific focus on the history of Africa and an emphasis on the work of African historians in constructing interpretations of the past based on archaeological sources (such as artefacts and surviving buildings) as well as written materials. With contributions from Sharon Aninakwa, Ciara McCombe and Nebiat Michael, three history teachers who trialled an early version of the enquiry, they explain its power not only in shaping in students' understanding of what history is, who engages in it and how they do so, but also in establishing important ideas about the richness and diversity of African history and the deep roots within that continent of both Christianity and Islam.

The Arab traveller and chronicler, Ibn Battuta, one of our most reliable sources for medieval Africa, recounts the story of Mansa Sulayman in vivid detail: he was a miser whose avarice stood in stark contrast with the lavish reign of his older and more celebrated brother, Mansa Musa.¹ Mansa Sulayman's reign does not give us the same Hollywood moment that Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca does, but it provides a powerful insight into the complexities of a medieval African royal court: palace intrigue, diplomatic drama and a major rebellion led by a queen that demanded a greater say in the affairs of the state. It is unlikely that Ibn Battuta would have been witness to Suleyman's dramatic troubles had he not been enticed by the stories he had heard of his more illustrious and generous brother. In reading Ibn Battuta, we find an important lesson to draw about the history of Africa: it can provide as much variety of narrative and perspective as that of Europe. One of our goals as history teachers has always been to show that African history has equal merit to other histories and it is by making Africa the context for historical thinking in different ways that we move towards this goal. It is widely recognised that there is no justice and recognition for Black people of African descent without respect for and serious engagement with the histories of the African continent.² The support for developing teachers' knowledge of African history that emerged in 2020 has been most encouraging, with a particular highlight being the online events with Toby Green, Trevor Getz and Nick Dennis.³ But the issue of finding space in the curriculum for the history of Africans before the encounters with European slave-traders remains a challenge.

In the summer of 2019, a group within our teacher network in London asked us to find one way of easing the dilemma, by designing an introductory enquiry for Year 7 students to begin their secondary school history studies with a focus on Africa. That network includes the three members of the history department at the Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College in Willesden, in north-west London, and they have played a critical role in the development of this enquiry. As we discussed in our 2012 article on developing African history in schools, collaborative interactive work is essentially *African*, in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, and the enquiry we discuss here is the revised version

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Figure 1: Outline of the lessons that make up the enquiry

Lesson	Focus	Questions and activities
1	<p>Setting up the enquiry into the history of religion and Africa.</p> <p>Sources from the past: the wonders of Lalibela.</p> <p>The coins from Axum.</p>	<p>What, where and when is the mystery building?</p> <p>What historical questions should we ask about religion and Africa?</p> <p>How can historians investigate connections between religion and Africa?</p> <p>What can we learn from historians Henry Louis Gates and Abebaw Gela about the religions of Axum from the two coins?</p>
2	<p>Time and place in the study of history: chronology and maps.</p> <p>The Axumite Empire, trade and religion in the 4th century CE.</p>	<p>How can we show events across time?</p> <p>The meaning of chronology and the use of a timeline to show the passage of time. Setting the timeline for use during the enquiry.</p> <p>Where did all this happen? The location of the Axumite Empire in Africa and its connections with the Middle East. Setting the map for use during the enquiry.</p> <p>The significance of the Axumite Empire in the 4th century CE, using a Greek text. What could be the connection between trade and the arrival of Christianity in Axum?</p>
3	<p>King Ezana of Axum and his conversion to Christianity.</p> <p>Using sources to support statements about the past.</p>	<p>Exploring who was responsible for bringing Christianity to Axum. What is the mix of myth and history in the conversion story of King Ezana?</p> <p>What can we learn about the complexity of their religion from the memorials of the stellae of the kings of Axum?</p> <p>Looking for evidence from sources to support statements about King Ezana and Axum.</p>
4	<p>The churches at Lalibela and their significance.</p> <p>Gus Casely-Hayford's exploration of the churches.</p>	<p>What was the significance of the names of the Lalibela churches? What was King Lalibela's project all about?</p> <p>How does an historian explore Lalibela? The awe of the churches for Casely-Hayford, and the significance of cosmopolitan influences from Judaism and Byzantium.</p> <p>Exploring links between the Lalibela church buildings and the stellae of Axum.</p>
5	<p>King Lalibela and the concepts of piety, authority and legitimacy. The Lalibela churches and their significance for the king.</p>	<p>Using clips from the Henry Louis Gates documentary, the students explore substantive concepts that will be important throughout their study of medieval history. What was important about the Lalibela churches and the king's piety?</p> <p>Why would the churches project at Lalibela help the legitimacy of the king's dynasty? Students learn about the importance of the Solomonic connection and Ethiopian dynasties.</p>
6	<p>The establishing of the faith of Islam in the 7th century and the flight to Axum for protection.</p>	<p>How did the faith of Islam become established and what was the context of the area of Arabia in the 7th century?</p> <p>How and why did the kingdom of Axum support some of the first followers of the prophet Muhammad? Students study a 14th century Persian picture of the events.</p>
7	<p>The spread of Islam across north and west Africa.</p> <p>Mansa Musa and the Malian Empire, and his Hajj.</p>	<p>Using clips from the Gates documentary and their map of Africa, students explore the spread of Islam across north and west Africa.</p> <p>The 14th century Catalan Atlas is then the source for learning about Mansa Musa and Islam in the region. The story of Mansa Musa's Hajj to Mecca conveys the idea of piety and wealth in the empire of Mali.</p>
8	<p>The empire of Mali and religion.</p> <p>Working with sources and generalisations in history.</p>	<p>This is the most challenging lesson of the enquiry, and could in itself represent the outcome activity. Sources are now seen as the basis for evaluating a generalisation that could be made about the past: 'Timbuktu under the Muslim rulers of Mali was a pious and prosperous society to live in.' The students are given five sources from the works of Ibn Battuta and Leo Africanus, and consider how far each one supports the generalisation. A particular challenge to overcome is a presentist judgment about religious practice in medieval Mali.</p>

that was produced after its initial teaching at the Convent in the autumn of 2019.⁴ The team have joined us in writing this article, discussing some of their evaluation of key aspects. The outline of the lessons of the enquiry is found in Figure 1.

'What is History?' and sources

Many schools begin Year 7 with a 'What is history?' unit that considers fundamental historical elements in fictional contexts, or without any context at all; the analogy of a detective investigating a mysterious death has been a popular approach, since the Mark Pullen case that featured at the start of the Schools Council History Project programme.⁵ These lessons could certainly grab the interest of 11-year-olds, but the young people can be disappointed when they are told the stories are not true. We decided it would be better to establish the 'felt difficulty' that Dewey explained was the basis of any enquiry thinking in any subject, with real historical narratives and to find narratives from Africa's past.⁶ Ed Podesta's Year 7 enquiry using archaeological sources from Roman Britain had already showed us the potential for such work.⁷ In the recent webinar 'What's the Wisdom on... Evidence and Sources', Katharine Burn emphasised the integral part that sources should play in the history classroom: not as a separate 'skills lesson', but as 'the very stuff of history'.⁸ We want the evidence that we draw from traces left by the past to be the basis for the knowledge that we build with our students: 'There is no history separate from sources – it's what doing history is all about.'

African history, misconceptions and the enquiry 'ethic'

In the medieval history of Africa, sources are limited, since oral tradition rather than manuscripts usually chronicled the narratives of African societies. But there are physical artefacts and buildings that remain for a number of early African kingdoms, and we hoped to draw on those for whatever knowledge we considered. It was also important to show Africa as diverse and not a single unit, as can often appear in the misrepresentation of 'Africa as a country'. One way of demonstrating this diversity from the start was to focus on religion, looking at the two great world religions that developed on the continent through medieval times, Christianity and Islam. This examination would focus on two different regions: one in east Africa for the former, and one in west Africa for the latter.

Another misrepresentation of Africa is the idea that Christianity arrived with the European colonisers in the nineteenth century. In fact, the religion was already established in Africa more than two hundred and fifty years before it was first preached in England. The ruler of Axum in the early fourth century, King Ezana, made Christianity the official religion of his kingdom around the same time that Constantine did so for the Roman Empire. Then, when the religion of Islam was founded in the early seventh century, it was Axum that provided a refuge for some of the early persecuted followers of the prophet Muhammad. Thus, the theme of religion is a good field for considering Africa's contribution to global history without the involvement of Europeans: a firm corrective for any misrepresentation of Africa as 'barbaric and primitive' before Western contact.

Figure 2: The opening of the enquiry: three slides that reveal the nature of the church of St George at Lalibela, Ethiopia (explained on pages 20–21)



This appears in the same area as the church building we just looked at.

Is there anything about this that shows a connection to Christianity?

What do you think this thing might be?



What kind of building does this look like?

Where in the world do you think this building might be?

When do you think this building might have been constructed?

This is a church building at a place called Lalibela in Ethiopia, in east Africa. It was built over 800 years ago.



This appears to be a church in a hole in the ground.

It's the same building we saw just now.

Figure 3: Working with the coins of King Ezana of Axum



I have learned that in the ancient Axum kingdom, the Axumites had a religion that was polytheistic. This meant that they had believed in many different gods such as a god for the moon, a god for the sun and many more. But in 350AD during Ezana's reign, Christianity was introduced to the kingdom. Its impact was very notable, which brought about many obvious changes to the kingdom. One significant change was the changing of the Aksumite coins which became the first coins of the world to hold a Christian symbol. Let's remember that the early Aksumite coins had a symbol of a crescent and a disk which symbolized their moon god and their sun god. After the introduction of Christianity, these coins then changed into the symbol of the cross which was a very clear way for the kingdom or the king to tell the world that they were Christians. Putting the Christian cross into their coins tells us the pride and the devotion to their belief and the fact that they were trading with other Christians further adds to the depth of their devotion.

An example of a Year 7 student's work (September 2020)

Africa is revealed as no 'dark continent'. When the students encounter such notions later, when they study the transatlantic slave trade and imperialism of the modern era, they will already have the 'residual knowledge' to challenge those falsehoods.⁹ However, they may already have absorbed some of the racist attitudes in our society about Africa, so there may be some interruption of the psyche when students see the glories of early African civilisations in this enquiry.

The enquiry's core message and purpose, its 'ethic', was to present Africa as a complex and sophisticated part of global history from medieval times, and to involve the students with the work of historians, particularly by using sources as evidence, to build that knowledge.¹⁰ The role of a detective might be a captivating proxy for the conventional, apparently dull, figure of an academic historian that many students, and perhaps some teachers, have in their mind, but we wanted to eschew that analogy and, rather, present young students with historians who could themselves be exciting and engaging. Sophia Nzeribe Nascimento's work in 2018 showed the importance of how our students perceive historians, and the narrow ideas that can effectively exclude so many people from that identity, particularly with respect to gender and race.¹¹ In studying African history, we wanted students to be introduced to Black historians, and people of the African continent itself. We had access to two fairly recent television series on African history that could provide us with recordings

of two prominent Black scholars at work: Dr Gus Casely-Hayford and Professor Henry Louis Gates.¹² Both of them also included discussions with African historians in their programmes. The programmes show the historians looking at physical traces from the past: Axumite coins dating from the fourth century, and church buildings from the thirteenth.

The opening of the enquiry

In the first version of this enquiry, we began with a device that we thought gave the students a contemporary situation connected to the topic that would also challenge their possible assumptions about Africa and religion. The students were shown four pictures of domed church buildings and asked to identify 'Which is the odd one out?' Although three of the churches are in Europe, while the fourth is in Africa, the answer was far from evident. They all looked very similar, with a splendid dome as the central feature. The African church was the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast, built in the 1980s at huge cost, which is the largest church site in the world, and closely resembles St Peter's in the Vatican. Although it showed the presence of Christianity in Africa, it was on European terms, and it revealed spellbinding extravagance at the expense of the needs of the Ivorian people. We quickly realised that our contrived device had actually served to reinforce stereotypes and confuse students. Back to the drawing-board for our

second iteration of the enquiry. In fact, we already had a most intriguing and revealing source within the body of the enquiry, and on re-teaching the enquiry this year, we decided to use it to open the whole sequence (as well as exploring its full potential later on). The Lalibela rock churches of the early thirteenth century were every bit as dramatic and remarkable as the grandest Gothic cathedrals in Europe, but they were excavated out of the earth, rather than being constructed on top of it. They were an authentic African wonder that spoke of the piety, legitimacy and sovereign power of King Lalibela and his dynasty in Ethiopia, and it was a source that the students could work with to understand those ideas about religion and rulers. A friend had visited the churches a few years ago, so we were able to use his pictures for the 'hook' for the very start of the new version of the enquiry. The first three slides of the presentation used in the first lesson created a sense of intrigue for the students, almost as if they were slowly walking at the site itself, towards the dramatic moment of revelation that hits visitors to Lalibela. In Figure 2 you can see the initial picture of the building, which students are asked to identify as far as they can; the next picture shows the top of the building at such an angle that it looks like some kind of ground level feature. The sequence of pictures in the third slide simulates the visual descent from that ground level down into the excavated church site. The students are spellbound.

The impact of the Lalibela opening at the Convent

For two students at the Convent this dramatic opening to the enquiry had an unanticipated impact; these were two Ethiopian girls. Their teacher, Ciara McCombe, writes:

'I never expected to learn about my country', was the response of the first student. Teaching African history is important for all students. African history offers students the opportunity to strengthen their understanding of our world and nurture an appreciation of *all* people who came before us. Her remark came as she started to realise that we were studying Axum, in modern-day Ethiopia. As the geography of the Axumite Empire began to be revealed, she looked puzzled as she realised she was familiar with the area and jubilant when it was confirmed that she was learning about her history. From her first ever lesson at the Convent, she knew that her history meant something, that it was important.

A curriculum which focuses on wider cultural capital illuminates students' understanding of history as they connect different periods and different geographies to later historical studies. It not only equips students with the confidence to question and debate misguided histories, but also expands the opportunities for students to be experts. [In another lesson], as I revealed the images of Lalibela on the board, the second student proudly shared that she had been there. The students were excited by this and started asking her questions: about how you would access the buildings, what it felt like inside and if she could bring in pictures. She became a tour guide, navigating us through our history lesson. She later reflected that the eagerness of her classmates in her history made her proud of her roots:

Figure 4: Helping students to use sources to support a statement/claim

Historians & Sources of Evidence

Historians use sources to give them *evidence* to help to answer questions about the past. They then decide what statements they can make in answer to the question. A source will not be useful to a historian for *every question* that is being asked.

An example: if we are answering the *question: What kind of ruler was King Ezana?*, we might make a *statement: 'Ezana was a proud religious ruler'*. A *source* of evidence we could use to support this would be:



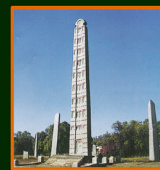
Historians & Sources of Evidence

Historians then have to decide *how strong* is the support that the evidence of the source can give to the statement they want to make.

Our example: The Ezana coin is a *strong* piece of evidence for Ezana being a proud religious ruler, because...

Possible response:

Ezana changed the symbols on his coin from the pagan sun and moon to a Christian cross. This coin would be used in trade all over the world, so he wanted everyone to know he was Christian.



This is another statement about the history of Axum: *'The people of Axum were very skilled builders.'*

Which of these sources of evidence would you choose to support this statement?

Why would it give strong evidence for the statement?

Is there any point you can think of that could limit the strength of the source?

Learning about a different culture in history, especially mine, was different, but was also interesting. It was nice to see that the curriculum was changing and teaching students about where things really originated from, but also showing us the history of somewhere other than Europe. It also educated me more about my culture and my people. But sharing it with my class and seeing them eager to learn about Ethiopia made me more proud of my roots.'

The additional personal engagement was delightful to see, and more so because of the way the whole class was drawn into a thoroughly intercultural sense of identity. The learning of the history had been a communal event, akin to *Ubuntu*, and reminiscent of the experience we had teaching an enquiry in east London on the history of British Somali people, and found that it was the white working-class boys in the class who were most engaged: 'it had taught us about our friends'.¹³

The enquiry question

Designing the enquiry question has always been one of the most interesting and creative elements of our enquiry planning, but it is the function that the question serves for the students' learning that must be its *raison d'être*. This was the first of our enquiries that would focus specifically on students emulating the basic kinds of process in which historians engage as they work with sources; we wanted the students to be intrigued throughout the enquiry but also very clear about the new kind of learning they were going to be undertaking in secondary school history lessons. We have likened the search for the right enquiry question to a builder using a spirit level, cleverly using ingenious words to 'get the bubble right in the middle of the glass'. In the end we settled on more prosaic wording than we often use:

*How can historians investigate connections between religions and Africa?*¹⁴

This kept the focus firmly on the work of historians but used the more familiar term 'investigate', rather than 'research', for what they do. We decided that the enquiry question did not need to act as the engine of curiosity: the sources would provide all the intrigue that was needed to captivate the students in their first secondary school history enquiry.

Working with sources

Towards the end of the first lesson, the students recorded the enquiry question, following a discussion of the kinds of questions they thought an historian could ask about religion in the history of Africa. The emergence of Christianity in Africa was introduced through two ancient coins from Axum, in present day Ethiopia. The Convent team tells us about the impact of this stage of the enquiry on their Year 7 students:

The enquiry starts with students studying two sources from King Ezana's reign. We made a set of these coins by laminating them and cutting them out to the size of the coin. Allowing students to work with these sources physically emulates how historians would engage with them and underscores that these sources in their original form are

real artefacts, not simply 'work' that the teacher has given them. The students found the key difference was that the religious symbols at the top of the coin have changed from a sun and moon to a cross. Students were challenged to draw the inference from this change and in the process they asked the crucial question 'why?' This is another important feature of enquiry. In this approach, the questions that the students formulate are organic and set the pace for their learning. Developing their understanding of sources and evidence, and of questioning, has also been effective in giving students the ability to write with sophistication too. Students were set a writing task at the beginning of each of the first few lessons to summarise their learning about religion and Africa from the sources they had examined so far. This work (shown in Figure 3) illustrates what it is possible for students to achieve very early on in their Year 7 learning journey.

One bugbear of most history teachers is the propensity of students to default to discarding a source, declaring simply that it is 'biased!' Andrew Payne's helpful maxim 'All sources are biased, get over it!' adorns our classroom walls. However, by posing carefully crafted questions, we require students to use the source positively, avoiding all possible notions of the 'b' word. The latter seems to be more possible with physical sources where there is less scope to question the integrity of the source. While we introduced students to questions of the relative value of sources, the focus was on what we *can* learn from them. Previously, we had approached 'source work' in rather simplistic and superficial ways in Year 7; in so doing we lost part of the integrity of the discipline of history and underestimated the students' ability to grapple with doing real history. The enquiry develops an understanding that historians *construct* interpretations and once students have a firm understanding of the beginning of the process of creating an interpretation, exploring and evaluating historical interpretations can be more meaningful.

Using sources with historians' statements

A key goal of this enquiry was to develop an understanding that sources are used by historians to frame and support the claims that they make about the past. At this stage of the students' learning, we decided not to use the term 'interpretations', but simply to talk about particular 'statements' that people writing, or speaking, about the past might make in response to a certain question. These were fairly straightforward statements, such as: 'Ezana was a proud religious ruler', responding to the question: 'What kind of ruler was King Ezana?' (see Figure 4). In seeking to make clear the distinction between 'sources' and 'interpretations', there is a danger that history teachers, and chief examiners at GCSE and A-level, establish a dichotomy between the two, rather than helping school students to see the essential connection between them in the work of historians.¹⁵ We wanted the Year 7 students to see this connection from the start. There has also been a strong emphasis on the notion of the reliability of sources, which has again led to unhelpful descriptions of a source as 'reliable' or 'unreliable' in itself. The task in the enquiry asked students to consider *how*

Figure 5: Images showing Gus Casely-Hayford at work used in the 'Africa and Religion' enquiry with Year 13 students

What are the *stages* of the work of a Historian?

B. Study sources to gain evidence to make claims



A. Question/ issue in the past to explore and study



C. Construct historical interpretations




strongly a source might support the statement being made, keeping any evaluation tied to that particular claim.

As well as engaging in their own interrogation of the sources, the Year 7 students were also shown recordings of historians handling sources and visiting historic buildings, while commenting on what these material remains were telling them about African history. It was not only the identity of these historians, discussed above, but also their passionate engagement with their work that made these scholars such important ambassadors for their academic discipline. Moreover, both Henry Louis Gates and Gus Casely-Hayford had involved African historians in their investigations. The insights provided by Dr Abebaw Gela, an Ethiopian historian, as he and Gates handle Ezana's coins, confirm the parity and normality of African alongside Western scholars. Placing the work of diverse engaged historians under a spotlight at the very start of Year 7 would hopefully influence the way that the students perceived historical scholarly endeavour as exciting all the way through their time at school. The Convent team decided that this kind of approach had previously been lacking in the experience of their older students and went on to make similar use of the ideas with their current A-level students.

Sharon tells us how the enquiry provided the inspiration for her Year 13 students:

The enquiry was framed to be taught in Year 7, but I really felt that there was much valuable learning that even our A-level students could engage with. They had recently completed mock assessments, in which they had to evaluate the value of an unseen primary source for an enquiry, which constitutes a core question on the A-level exam. Needless to say, I was concerned that students were not approaching the question effectively, and their answers didn't do themselves justice. As I was writing their feedback notes, I started to think about this enquiry and what was missing from the students' appreciation of primary sources. I wanted to demonstrate what the exam question was essentially asking of them in a way that would resonate and engage them. At this point in the school year, I knew the students needed inspiration, rather than simply instruction. I decided that the video clip of Gus Casely-Hayford (see Figure 5) engaging dynamically in history making could illustrate to the A-level students the exact process they also needed to replicate. The clip had worked so powerfully with Year 7s that I was confident the A-level students could appreciate it even more, given their more advanced understanding of history. Before I showed the class the clip, I first gave the students three

Figure 6: The early Muslim followers taking refuge in Axum



The King of Axum

The Axumite king's advisors

The pagan arabs asking for the Muslim refugees

This source depicts the moment the King of Axum denied the pagan Arabs their request to hand over the followers of Muhammad, known as Muslims. This was a picture painted by a Persian scholar called Rashid al-Din in 1314 as part of his History of the World manuscript.

1. *How has this Rashid al-Din chosen to depict the Christian King of Axum?*
2. *Why would the King of Axum choose to protect the Muslim refugees against the much more powerful Arab pagans?*

images of Casely-Hayford (see Figure 5) that exemplified the stages of the work of an historian and asked the students what they thought each stage entailed.

The images sparked an effective discussion around the process of an historian and the relationship between sources and interpretations. We then watched the clip of Casely-Hayford in his element as he approaches the Lalibela churches for the first time. The clip was the perfect stimulus for illuminating how historians use sources. The students were surprised at the genuine intrigue and joy of this professional historian. 'It's like the historian has a muse' one student reflected. That was the 'lightbulb moment' in the lesson. I had never associated historians with having a muse; the students brought new perspectives and learning to my own appreciation of history. The way in which the students unpacked this clip shed even more light for me on the importance of students seeing historians *enjoying* history making. I have already seen how this learning experience has dramatically shifted the way students approach primary source work and their appreciation of what they need to do in response to the source evaluation question on their exam papers. Perhaps they might come to enjoy working with sources as much as the historians clearly did!

Islam and Africa

That the religion of Islam swept out of Arabia in the seventh century to reshape the Middle East through conquest and proselytising is a well-known story. What is less widely known is how the adherents of this new faith were welcomed

in Africa many years before they could practise their faith in what is now its most sacred city. In Lesson 6 we shared with students the story of how the Christian kingdom of Axum expanded its influence in the sixth century into southern Arabia, which at the time was a religious *mélange* of monophysite Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Arab polytheists. The birth of a new monotheistic faith threatened the latter's control of the lucrative pilgrimage routes to Mecca, which at the time was the pre-eminent polytheist site of worship. Many of our students had to come to accept a monolithic view of Arabia and this focus on the geopolitics of the region helped them to develop a better understanding of the spread of Islam as well as the wider significance of the kingdom of Axum. Students were asked to infer how Axum was perceived in the Islamic world using a fourteenth-century Persian painting that depicted the audience that the King of Axum granted to the polytheist Arabs in 614 CE (see Figure 6). The latter were denied their request to have the Muslim refugees from Arabia handed back to them: an act that highlighted both the power of the king of Axum and the growing appeal of Islam in the region.

Generalisations and conflicting sources

We introduced the idea of generalisations in discussions with students, particularly in identifying any misconceptions they had about medieval Arabia and Africa. In the final lesson on Mali we addressed the issue of misconceptions more directly by explaining how and why historians generalise. Generalisation is indispensable in historical explanation; the concept of an era or period is impossible without

Figure 7: Generalisation and sources in the lesson on Mali and Islam

the use of some generalisation but generalisations are, of course, far less helpful when we apply them to peoples and cultures.¹⁶ The writings of Ibn Battuta were an excellent way of introducing students to this concept, as his work, by its nature, is largely general.¹⁷ He was writing about people that were almost wholly alien to his audience and so, in the interest of brevity and entertainment, he constantly generalised about the people he described. As we explained to our students, this presents a problem to the historian, as he is one of the few sources we have for medieval Mali. Figure 7 shows the instructions for the activity. These sources were far more challenging for the students than the artefacts and buildings that had been used before, and our teachers needed to provide appropriate scaffolding for their students. In particular, there were aspects of knowledge about the religion that many students needed to learn. Ibn Battuta's work took a balanced approach, discussing both positive and negative aspects of Mali's religious society. However, Source 5 in Figure 7 presents our students with a challenge of ethical judgement, and raises the problem of *presentism* in working as a student of history. Ibn Battuta praised the chaining of children to encourage learning, but this would be seen as clear abuse in modern societies. While we concluded with our students that this practice occurred and may have been common, it would not have been everyone who engaged in it, so the generalisation needs that qualification. But students also needed to accept that the source does not contradict the idea of piety, even if they might find some of the practices it describes unacceptable today. Through such activities, the Year 7 students learned about the importance of *historical context* and meaningful reflection on sources. As teachers, we were moving beyond presenting a one-sentence attribution of a text, and assuming that would be sufficient for our students to make appropriate judgements about a particular source and how it might be used. It is only through deeper consideration of context, that students can develop a fuller understanding of the work of an historian.

Conclusion

When students from Year 7, or indeed from any year group, come to the end of this enquiry into Africa and religion, they should have some understanding that the continent once termed 'dark' by imperialist propagandists has a rich history from a period of time in which Europeans were undergoing their own alleged 'dark ages'. A sound grasp of the flourishing medieval civilisations of Africa will give students a proper basis for evaluating the impact of European contact from 1500 onwards. They will also have come to appreciate that there are complex answers to the questions 'What is history?' and 'Who are historians?', and that history will be a fascinating subject for them to pursue throughout their school careers.

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Sources and evidence and historical claims - working with generalisations.

From the Catalan Atlas and the story of Mansa Musa's Hajj, you might have the impression that the people of Mali were very wealthy and religious.

'Timbuktu under the Muslim rulers of Mali was a pious and prosperous society to live in.'

This would be a **generalisation** that you would want to investigate with further sources. We are going to explore the writings of two Muslim scholars writing outside of Mali: Ibn Battuta and Leo Africanus.

Relevant contextual knowledge about Islam: importance of memorising scriptures

Source 5

'Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white shirts on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another good quality is their desire to learn the Qu'ran by heart. They put their children in chains if they show any difficulties in memorizing it and they are not set free until they have learnt it properly.'

Written by Ibn Battuta, 1352



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