

Historiography

Less about facts, more about how those facts are used and how we interpret them

“Bentley minimizes the danger befalling Pope Leo and excludes the cause of Charlemagne’s intervention, whereas Beck and his co-authors omit one major effect: that the new Holy Roman Emperor spawned the jealousy of Byzantine kings.”

Imagine that an army conquered a small country 200 years ago, and you have the following sources:

- A proclamation of victory written in the aftermath of the conquest
- A diary written by someone who lived at the time and recollects the experience
- A book written 150 years later, analyzing the proclamation
- An academic journal article written two years ago that examines the diary
- An encyclopedia entry written last year, which is based on both the book and the journal

So, which is what? How do we classify each?

Imagine a particular [history] class, occurring in November. Sophie, a 9th grader, enters a few minutes early to find the teacher and one other student already at the oval table. They exchange greetings and then Sophie says, “So Madison is a little crazy here, huh? He really doesn’t trust the American people.” Sophie is referring to “Federalist #10,” the assigned homework for the day’s class. The other student immediately suggests various reasons that Madison was rightly worried about factions. Their classmates fill in around the table and a couple ask, “What are you guys talking about?” Sophie fills them in and some new voices enter the discussion. “It wasn’t a matter of trust or distrust,” someone counters, “it’s simply a matter of self-interest and we all have it.” The class, becoming quite engaged by this, quickly opens to the document, and discussion ensues. Somewhere within this exchange, the class learning began, yet the teacher has said nothing.