Primary Source Study:
A Sixteenth-Century Letter from the Queen of England to the Mughal Emperor

Created by Mairi Cowan, Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto

Introduction

This assignment provides students with the opportunity to read and analyze a fascinating primary source from the sixteenth century: the letter sent from Elizabeth I, Queen of England, to Akbar, Mughal Emperor, in 1583. It would be suitable for various secondary school and university courses in History and English.

Under the guidance of their instructor, students proceed through several steps in order to develop different skills associated with the use of primary sources in historical research – skills such as the close reading of a single primary source, the consultation of secondary sources, and the generation of good research questions. Students begin by reading the primary source itself, a short letter by Elizabeth I. Next, they answer some basic questions using only information found within the letter. Then, they consult outside sources to expand and deepen their understanding of the letter and its historical context. Finally, they generate and explore bigger questions arising from this one primary source.

Step 1: Read the Letter

Distribute copies of the “Letter from Elizabeth to Akbar”, which can be found on the final page of this package.

Some words in the letter will look unusual to students at first because of their spelling, but the English in this source is actually quite close to what is spoken today. Students will probably find the letter easier to understand if they hear it while reading, so have students take turns reading the letter out loud, sentence by sentence, for the class.

Step 2: Answer Some Basic Questions About the Letter

Write the following questions on the board (or provide the questions on a handout), and ask students to answer them using just the letter as their source.

Questions:

1. Who was the writer of the letter? [Answer: Elizabeth]
2. Who was the intended recipient of the letter? [Answer: lord Zelabdim Echebar king of Cambaya. Inuincible Emperor]
3. Why were the carrier of the letter and those traveling with him visiting areas so distant from their homes? [Answer: John Newbery and those in his company were traveling to trade merchandise.]
4. What was being requested by the writer? [Answer: that her subjects be honestly treated and received]
Step 3: Expand and Deepen Your Answers to These Basic Questions

Write the following questions on the board (or provide the questions on a handout), and ask students to answer them using information from outside the letter itself. They may wish to consult the Travels of the Lute map and the “Additional Resources” listed on the Travels of the Lute site.

5. What were three (or more) significant characteristics or accomplishments of the “Elizabeth” who wrote the letter? Hint: She was an English queen who reigned from 1558 to 1603. You can find out more about her from the Travels of the Lute map.

6. What were three (or more) significant characteristics or accomplishments of the “Zelabdim Echebar king of Cambaya” who received the letter? Hint: He was Akbar, the Mughal emperor who reigned from 1556 to 1605. You can find out more about him from the Travels of the Lute map.

7. What can you discover about “Iohn Newbery” and “those that be in his company”? Hint: John Newbery, as his name is more commonly spelled, was a London merchant who made several long-distance voyages. With him on the particular voyage when he was carrying the letter from Elizabeth were the merchant Ralph Fitch, the jeweller William Leach, and the artist James Storie. You can read some letters that they sent back to England here:
   http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/kerr/vol07chap09sect02.html
   http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/kerr/vol07chap09sect03.html

8. Why were English merchants interested in trade with people living in the Mughal Empire? Hint: make a timeline featuring events and developments in Europe and Asia from around the time the letter was written, and make a chart to organize the origins and destinations of the most valuable items of trade in the early modern world.

Step 4: Explore Bigger Questions Arising from the Letter

Have students develop and explore larger and more complex questions that arise from their reading of the letter. You may wish to assign the following prompts to get them started.

9. Mere flattery? In her letter, Elizabeth speaks of Akbar and his empire in very positive terms. Research both the role of rhetoric in Elizabethan writing and also the accomplishments of Akbar as Mughal emperor. Use the results of this research to assess the accuracy of Elizabeth’s characterization of Akbar.

10. Delights and perils of long-distance travel? The letter makes reference at several points to the great distance between Elizabeth’s and Akbar’s lands. Research how people would have traveled between England and India including what routes they would have taken, what pleasures they would have experienced, and what dangers they would have faced.

11. Benefits of trade? The letter speaks of “the mutual and friendly trafique of marchandize”. How much trade existed between England and India at the time when the letter was written? Who had more to gain from this trade: English producers, Indian producers, English merchants, Indian merchants, English consumers, or Indian consumers?
12. Likeminded leaders? Elizabeth and Akbar were both famous in their own lifetimes as great rulers, and their reputations have both endured through the centuries. Compare and contrast their rules.
Letter from Elizabeth to Akbar

A letter written from the Queenes Majestie, to Zelabdin Echebar, King of Cambaia, and sent by Iohn Newbery. In February Anno 1583.

Elizabeth by the grace of God &c. To the most invincible, and most mightie prince, lord Zelabdim Echebar king of Cambaya. Invincible Emperor, &c. The great affection which our Subjects haue, to visit the most distant places of the world, not without good will and intention to introduce the trade of marchandize of al nations whatsoeuer they can, by which means the mutual and friendly trafique of marchandize on both sides may come, is the cause that the bearer of this letter Iohn Newbery, ioynly with those that be in his company, with a curteous and honest boldnesse, doe repaire to the borders and countreys of your Empire, we doubt not but that your imperiall Majestie through your royal grace, will fauourably and friendly accept him. And that you would doe it the rather for our sake, to make vs greatly beholding to your Maiestie; wee should more earnestly, and with more wordes require it, if wee did think it needful. But by the singular report that is of your imperial Maiesties humanitie in these vtermost parts of the world, we are greatly eased of that burden, and therefore we vse the fewer and lesse words: onely we request that because they are our subiects, they may be honestly intreated and receiued. And that in respect of the hard iourney which they haue vndertaken to places so far distant, it would please your Maiestie with some libertie and securitie of voiage to gratifie it, with such priuileges as to you shall seeme good: which curtesie if your Imperiall maiestie shal to our subiects at our requests performe, wee according to our royall honour, wil recompence the same with as many deserts as we can. And herewith we bid your Imperial Maiestie to farewel.

Please cite this resource as: