Although casual readers may seldom encounter them, primary sources—the texts written by people at the time of the events themselves—are the principal foundations upon which our understanding of history is built. If most of the “artifacts” that are featured in the main textbook emphasize the physical or material evidence—objects and buildings—of the premodern Mediterranean, this collection of documents focuses exclusively on textual evidence.

The cultures and societies of the medieval and early Mediterranean were both literate and literary, and the peoples who lived along its shores produced volumes of material in a whole range of languages: not only the main “canonical” languages of Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew; but also regional languages such as Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, Slavonic, and Persian; local vernaculars, whether these were Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Turkic, Berber, or Arabic-based; and linguistic “hybrids,” such as Aljamiado, Ladino, and Judaeo-Arabic, written using borrowed alphabets. Moreover, being relatively urbanized and commercialized, the societies of the premodern Mediterranean were impressively literate. Unlike medieval northern Europe, where writing and manuscript production were for many centuries almost entirely in the hands of narrow religious and secular elites, and the production of records was discouraged by the scarcity and expense of writing materials, here, many people of the middle social strata as well as many slaves could read and write (or have people read and write for them). In this connected world of long- and medium-distance communication and of commerce and exchange, people from all walks of life wanted to keep records of all sorts, and the increasing plentifulness and economy of paper encouraged and enabled them to do so.

Thus, the textual record for the times and places covered in the textbook is exceptionally rich and varied, and we have tried to reflect this in our selection of sources. These include
scripture and works on theology, scientific texts, works of literature—stories, songs, and poems—chronicles and histories written at the time, letters and dispatches, biographies and memoirs, business contracts, receipts, account books, trial records, and so on. Together these provide a window onto not only the aspirations and agendas of the powerful but those of people from all walks of life and conditions. At times they give us—and this is exceptional for the history of the Middle Ages—an opportunity to hear ordinary people speaking to us across the centuries in their own languages (translated here) and often with their own voices.

THIS COLLECTION

The collection itself consists of a selection of readings corresponding to each of the fifteen chapters of the textbook, with between five and seven documentary units for each chapter. These vary in length from one to several pages; some consist of one primary source excerpt, but most include selections from two or more comparable texts written in different times and places and by members of different ethno-religious communities.

Reading primary sources is crucial to the study of history, particularly when one is faced with a narrative as complex as the one presented in *The Sea in the Middle*. In order to weave together a narrative that covered a thousand years and incorporated peoples and cultures from across Europe, Africa, and western Asia, we, the authors, were obliged to leave out many interesting details and to abbreviate many complicated episodes. The document collection has given us an opportunity to address some of the gaps in coverage that necessarily appear in the main narrative. Here, for example, in the primary source excerpts, we have tried to illuminate the role of women in the premodern Mediterranean—which has been largely obscured (as is typically the case with medieval history) both by contemporary observers and (until recently) by modern historians. Similarly, the documentary passages have given us a chance to highlight other groups that are generally left out of or glossed over in the historical narrative, be these peasants or members of the urban lower classes or ethnic and religious minorities.

We have also tried to maintain a balance in terms of the main religious cultures represented here, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, as well as the many confessions and sectarian subgroups that characterize them. Part of the message of the book is that, for all they differed, the religious cultures of the Mediterranean shared much, not only in terms of heritage and theology, but in the way they approached social, economic, and political challenges. The same can be said for the geographic origin of the texts we have chosen and the people represented therein. We have tried to maintain a balance between the various regions discussed in the book, including the western European Mediterranean (Spain, France, and Italy), Anatolia and Balkans, the Levant and Middle East, and Egypt, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa.

All of this has involved hard choices. The documentary and textual record that survives varies markedly from region to region, over time, and from culture to culture. Sometimes
this is a function of the types of texts that were produced and the types of records that were kept, and at others by the specific works that have survived—and the suitability for those surviving records to be excerpted in short digestible bites suitable for undergraduate students in a book such as this. As a result, the balance is necessarily imperfect, and this may lead some readers to suspect that certain themes, cultures, or regions have received preferential treatment or undue emphasis.

That has not been our intention, and indeed, we have deliberately worked to ensure that the greatest variety of genres, texts, linguistic traditions, and authors are represented here. After all, one of the main thrusts of the textbook is that the Western culture that emerged out of the premodern Mediterranean was not the product of a single tradition or a single line of transmission. Rather, it emerged out of a sustained process of dialogue, exchange, conflict, and competition that played out over the course of centuries and involved the continual introduction of new technologies, commodities, ideas, and strategies originating across the region and beyond.

A consequence of this is that we, the editors, have had to make difficult decisions, often passing up an “ideal” or “classic” text in favor of one perhaps less well-known or less evocative in the name of maintaining those balances. If despite our efforts, it may seem that some regions receive preferential treatment or undue emphasis, this is not a reflection of any scholarly prejudices on our part. The Iberian Peninsula and Italy or the Muslim Middle East may appear to have an outsized presence in this reader, but this only because of the uncharacteristic quantity and variety of primary sources that these regions produced and which survived. An impressive number have been translated into English and other modern European languages (and in some cases we have done the translations ourselves). Other regions at other times, such as the pre-Ottoman Balkans, non-Muslim and non-Byzantine Anatolia and the Levant, or northwest Africa, often produced less material of less variety or of which less has survived. As editors, we have had to balance representation and inclusivity with the objectives of clearly communicating the key themes of each chapter. Thus, the texts we have selected and those we have left out should not be construed as conveying any prejudices regarding the cultures that produced them or their importance in this history we have sketched out.

HOW TO USE IT

The readings here relate to themes explored in The Sea in the Middle—cross-references there are provided to the relevant reader unit—and this book follows the same chapter structure as the textbook. These primary source readings are intended to provide students with the raw material for discussions of those themes. By juxtaposing analogous or similar works we hoped to highlight both the similarities and differences in the approach of the various peoples of the Mediterranean to these subjects.

Each chapter of this book begins with a short preface highlighting the major themes to be explored and providing a chronological framework for the readings. The units within the
chapters each begin with a short introduction, which provides a brief contextualization of the authors and the pieces, situating them in time and space, indicating the documents’ original language, noting their genre, and providing clues to the authors’ identities, objectives, biases, and intended audience. Instructors and students are expected and encouraged to flesh these out with their own research and readings. The three questions or points to consider that accompany each unit are intended to provide a starting point for in-class discussion but can also provide leads for potential essays or research assignments. As often as was possible we took these excerpts from texts that have already been published in English. Thus, those working on them in greater depth should have little trouble accessing the full texts or collections they are drawn from.

It should be noted that most of the selections are adapted rather than simply excerpted from their originally published translations. We have not changed the sense or substance of these passages, but merely brought them into line with the editorial and linguistic conventions of the textbook. In some cases, passages have had to be cropped considerably in order to fit them into this format. We have tried to make any such emendations clear, but in any case, readers who wish to delve deeper should consult the source texts as they were published.

And so, we hope that this little collection will help to breathe some life into the necessarily often rather abstract narrative of the main text. In these pages you will encounter travelers, pilgrims, merchants, pirates, warriors, queens, theologians, and missionaries. You will come to face-to-face with their fears, ambitions, agendas, and desires. It is our intention that in these pages you might gain a glimpse of the sorts of individuals who populated the cosmopolitan and dynamic world of the Mediterranean from the twilight of antiquity to the dawn of modernity—people no less fascinating, frustrating, intriguing, and complex than anyone you will meet today.