

Documents, Editions and Translations

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Historians usually draw their evidence from written documents of some sort. Since ancient times, scholars have accepted that contemporary, preferably eye-witness records provide the most reliable source of evidence for past events. This means that all historians must base their work on original documents from the historical period that they are studying. Very often, however, they will rely on published documents that have been edited or even translated, rather than the originals. As historians, we need to ask what impact using such edited documents has on the accuracy of our work.¹

In historical terms, a document is a written record, but it need not be written on paper. Before the invention of the typewriter, most documents were not printed, so historians must learn their subjects' handwriting as well as their language. These original documents were written in the language of their creators, following the conventions for writing then in use. Sometimes they were created as a temporary record and were never intended for later generations to decipher.

As many of the published documents studied by students at university have gone through a process of editing and possibly translation, what the student sees on the printed page has already been partially interpreted, even before the student lays eyes on it. It can be difficult to work out what is from the original document and what has been introduced by the editor. So students must not take documents at face value, but what *is* the face value of a document?

Documents

Professional historians find many of the original documents for their research in archives, which have been discussed in the previous chapter. Many others are in libraries, having already been published – perhaps centuries ago. Having got her hands on an original document, the first thing for the historian to consider is the document as a physical object. She

should examine the material of the document (paper? parchment? cloth? clay? wood? stone?). This could indicate the significance of the document to its creator: whether it was intended to be kept or was a temporary record. So, fourteenth-century English legal records were generally recorded on parchment, which lasts for centuries; while personal letters sent by members of the garrison of the Roman military camp at Vindolanda were written on wooden tablets, and intended to be temporary. On the other hand, this could simply indicate what was available to the document's creator: for example, novels published in Britain during the Second World War were printed on cheap paper because paper was scarce in wartime.

The historian should also look at the physical context of the document: that is, what other documents are with this one. Has it been filed or bound with other documents? Bindings may be contemporary, but often documents were rebound by later collectors. The binding gives an indication of how the document was used at some point in its history, but not necessarily how it was used when it was first created. For example, a modern archive might group documents relating to the same estate together, but originally those documents were produced at different times by different people for different purposes. A modern library may bind a series of weekly magazines together, but few of the original readers would have read successive issues side-by-side. A 1920s publisher might have issued several best-selling novels together under a single binding, giving a modern historian an insight into the expected readership of those novels.

Having examined the physical shape and context of the document, the historian can start to read it – or at least try to read it. An old document may have been damaged by water, mice or poor storage, so that parts are no longer legible. Handwritten documents from any period of history can be extremely difficult to read. An early twentieth-century letter-writer writing to a friend did not need to produce a document that an outsider could read, and the resulting scrawl might be almost undecipherable to a stranger. Thirteenth-century English government records were written in a characteristic record-keeping script, which was heavily abbreviated in order to save time and parchment. Virtually illegible to the casual eye, like modern shorthand, this is easy to read when you have learnt the code – but first you must learn it.

Battling with old shorthand or modern scrawl is all very well for the professional researcher, but students at university normally study published works, on paper or online. If the document was originally unpublished, this published text will have been edited by a skilled researcher, to make it readily available to other scholars and students. Even works that were originally published, such as the publications of William Caxton (c.1415–1492, the first Englishman to print books), may be republished in modern format and with a modern commentary to make them more accessible to modern readers.

Editions

An edited text is intended to produce an accessible version of a historical document, so that researchers can consult a printed text rather than the inaccessible, indecipherable original. It may combine several versions of a document, showing how they relate to each other and how the final versions of the document were developed. A published edition also allows the original documents to be preserved, rather than researchers repeatedly handling these unique or rare and fragile historic artefacts.

However, the production of an edited text involves a process of interpretation and analysis by the editor. When you read a printed edition of a historic text, you are reading the editor's interpretation of how that text should be read and used. Any interpretations you then put upon that printed edition are to some extent dependent on decisions already made by the editor.

The first decision an editor makes is that a certain document should be made more widely available. But which document should be selected? The catalogue of any archive contains thousands, even millions of unpublished documents, of which only a handful will ever be published. It may appear easy to point out the 'bias' in a text, which reflects the original author's own views. Yet the chance that leads to one document being published while another is not can skew future students' view of events in the past more effectively than any biased author.

Editors select documents on the basis of their apparent significance for the study of history. They might select important diplomatic records, the writings of significant persons, representative records of taxation, records of significant legal cases, accounts and analyses of important events written by contemporaries of those events, the archives of influential national and international institutions, personal letters, diaries, personal wills, popular novels – in fact, any document that casts significant light on a particular area of history.

Of course, researchers differ in what they regard as significant. Researchers who are interested in the development of Parliament are unlikely to regard the court records from a small village in Northamptonshire (for example) as significant. However, the gender historian Judith Bennett used the court records from the Northamptonshire village of Brigstock to recreate the life of Cecilia Penifader (c. 1295–1344), a non-noble medieval woman – a member of a section of society which is virtually unmentioned in contemporary historical accounts.² Would-be editors' selection of documents is a personal choice, reflecting their own research interests: but other researchers would probably have made a different selection. As the majority of documents remain unread and unknown, we cannot be certain that those which have been chosen are representative of the rest.

Having chosen the documents, the next question is how they should be published. Some documents can be satisfactorily reproduced in photographs,

which can be published in printed form or in digital form online. Photographs are a good means of reproducing and distributing a document if it is short and the text is easy to read, and if the document is readily understandable without additional information. However, many documents are not, perhaps because they are not in a modern language, or are difficult to read, or because additional information is required to interpret them. What is more, if there are several different versions of the document, photographs will only allow the reader to compare them; it will not show the reader how the various versions relate to each other. A published edition will involve analysis of the original documents to establish how they link together.

Having decided that an edition is needed, how does the original document become a published text? The answer might seem obvious – copy what is there! But this can be easier said than done.³

If the original document includes diagrams or drawings, how should the editor deal with these? If they are not integral to the text, editors usually leave them out, perhaps indicating in a footnote that there was a picture in the original. This means that highly illustrated documents, such as the works of the famous medieval monk-commentator Matthew Paris (d. 1259), or Guillaume Caoursin's eye-witness account of the Ottoman Turks' siege of Rhodes in 1480, are generally published without their illustrations, or with only a select few. The illustrations may be published in a separate part of the book, or in a separate volume.⁴ Yet, without the context of the text, it is difficult to appreciate how the original readers would have interpreted them. In such cases, online publication of the original document can allow modern readers to see what the original looked like, while the printed edition allows them to read it. However, for long documents or large collections of documents it is impractical to include photographs of the complete original text in the printed book, although it may be possible to reproduce these online.⁵

Sometimes the illustrations are such a key part of the text that it is incomprehensible without them. The Bayeux Tapestry is a document that includes text, but the text makes little sense without the images on the tapestry. The correspondence of the Scottish scientist Joseph Black (1728–99) contains calculations, lists of figures from scientific observations, accounts and diagrams to illustrate his points. The published edition of his letters includes all these details, carefully positioned in relation to the text so that the modern reader sees something like the original form of the letter.⁶ However, the cost of producing such an edition is enormous, and so the purchase price is correspondingly high.

Whether or not the original text has illustrations, the editor will have to decide how far she is prepared to amend the original to make it easily understood by modern readers. If the text does not make sense, should she 'correct' it? Should she fill in gaps? Modern editors prefer to keep 'corrections' to a minimum.

If the text is repetitive, should she simply summarize it? On the other hand, if the text is abbreviated should the editor resolve the abbreviations, or leave the text as it was originally written? For example, each letter of the text of *Domesday Book* (1086) is clear, but each entry is very heavily abbreviated. If the editor leaves the abbreviations as they stand, non-experts will need some guidance to understand the text, such as notes in the margin or at the bottom of the page. Most scholars agree that it is easier to resolve all abbreviations and present readers with a complete text. Normally, this is easily done, although sometimes it is not clear what the complete word should be! But resolving the abbreviations raises another problem.

Where the text is heavily abbreviated, producing a complete text without any abbreviations gives readers a false impression of the document. They certainly see the information that was in the document, but not as it was originally presented. To take a modern example, consider these two sentences:

‘Shall I or sh’an’t I?’ – ‘Don’t do it’.

If we resolve the abbreviations, this reads as:

‘Shall I or shall I not?’ – ‘Do not do it’.

– resolving the abbreviations changes the tone of the text from casual banter to a formal conversation. Similar issues could arise with any historical text.

The editor could try to get around this problem by indicating where she has resolved abbreviations; if readers can see how the text has been changed they can imagine how the original readers would have seen it. The drawback is that the printed words become difficult to read.

A similar problem arises over spelling and capitalization. Modern readers prefer consistent spelling, and they expect all personal names to have a capital letter and other nouns to start with a lower-case letter. But when the document was written, conventions may have been completely different, using different spelling of names each time they appeared, or with all nouns capitalized or none. Should the modern editor follow modern conventions or those in use when the document was created? Should the editor of a new edition of Jane Austen’s novels (for example) modernize the spelling? Changing the text to match modern conventions may make it easier for modern readers to understand, but also creates a false impression of the past.

Even twentieth-century documents can present challenges to a modern student’s expectations. A modern reader studying the autobiography of Guy Gibson, *Enemy Coast Ahead* (1944) may be shocked by the name of the wartime hero’s dog, a black labrador whom Gibson called by a colloquial form of the Latin word for black. As that word is now highly offensive, should a modern editor remove it?

Clearly, these editorial decisions can make a considerable difference to the final text. So in the introduction to the edition, the conscientious editor will set out the conventions she has followed, to allow readers to understand how the text has been amended. Not all editors provide this information, but readers must remember that some amendments will have been made. The editor should also point out what has been omitted from the published edition, such as illustrations in the original document, or additions in the margins (*marginalia*). She may also mention aspects of the document which cannot be reproduced on the printed page, such as where the document has been heavily worn (this might indicate that a particular part of the document has been read more than the rest).

The editor will also have to decide how much additional information to include with the text to enable readers to interpret it for themselves. Should he identify every person named, every place and every allusion which will not be immediately familiar to the reader? He must decide what he can assume as standard knowledge and what a non-expert will not know. This information may be included in the introduction to the edition, or put into footnotes or endnotes. If the editor gives too much information, he will find that some of his notes fill a whole page – but if he does not give enough information, readers will be confused. Readers must also bear in mind that the information that the editor provides will reflect his own interpretation of the text.

Critical Editions

What if there is more than one version of the original text?⁷ If the document is a personal letter, or a government record – for example, a tax return – there is probably only one copy. But before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, every copy of a book had to be copied out by hand, and each scribe wrote slightly differently. Sometimes scribes added or removed information. Sometimes they made mistakes, such as accidentally leaving out a few lines of the text they were copying. The modern editor has to compare the various surviving versions, analysing them to decide which variant of the text to prefer, and producing a *critical edition*.

The aim of a critical edition is often to reconstruct the original text as written by the original author. However, texts which began in an oral form may not have had an identifiable original author; and as texts were copied and recopied, they developed new forms to meet the requirements of new generations, which may be just as interesting to historians as the non-existent ‘original’ text. If a text clearly went through several formative stages, the editor may decide to print more than one version: so when William Roach produced a critical edition of three of the continuations of Chrétien de Troyes’ adventure-romance *Perceval* (c. 1191), he printed three quite different versions of the first continuation.⁸

It is easy to understand why many critical editions are of texts that survive in just a few manuscripts. Locating every surviving manuscript of a

text is a time-consuming business. The editor has to copy the manuscripts, often from photographs, then compare them, and so decide which version of the text to print as the main text and which versions are subsidiary. Where a text was frequently copied and circulated widely, it is so difficult and time-consuming to produce a comprehensive critical edition that it may be impossible for a single scholar to complete the work in a lifetime. As a result, there is no critical edition of many of the books which were best known in the middle ages. Instead, scholars rely on early printed versions, or printed editions based on just one or two manuscripts. But of course, these editions only represent one version of the text that medieval people knew.

For example, in the second half of the twelfth century, Archbishop William of Tyre wrote a history of the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem which covered the period from the First Crusade (1095–99) to 1184. He wrote in Latin, the language of the educated elite, but in the early thirteenth century, his history was translated into French and circulated widely: it has been estimated that nearly every castle and major town in Western Europe would have known this work.⁹ Later writers added to his history, and over seventy manuscripts survive of the French translation with different continuations. Clearly, this was the version of the history of the crusader states familiar to thirteenth-century Europeans – it would have influenced their view of the crusades, of Islam and of the Middle East as a whole. However, because the work was so widely read and so many different versions survive in manuscript form, producing a modern critical edition is a difficult task. In the meantime, scholars refer to nineteenth-century editions, based on just a handful of manuscripts. And even when a critical edition is published, as the text is in medieval French students will ask for a translation: which brings us to the next problem.

Translations

The translator's lot is not a happy one. She must produce a text which a modern reader finds accessible and interesting, without losing the meaning of the original text. That original was the product of a very different society and culture, with expectations very different from those of a modern readership. The translator must be familiar with the society from which the original text came, and able to translate its concepts and concerns into language which modern readers will understand. She must try to understand what the original author intended to say and then render that intention into modern English.

To make matters more difficult, the original language of the text may not be amenable to straightforward translation. To take the case of the Old French translations of William of Tyre: thirteenth-century French was still developing into a literary language. It was not yet well suited to sophisticated narratives; its vocabulary was limited and its users struggled to express complex theological or scientific concepts. The modern translator must decide whether to translate using the same limited vocabulary and

stilted style, or whether to use the wider range of vocabulary and lucid style that modern English offers. Most readers would prefer the latter, but they will then miss the direct simplicity of the original prose.

Translators also have to decide whether to retain the sentence structure of their original, or to use a modern sentence structure. Medieval writers piled phrase upon phrase, so that a sentence could be as long as a modern paragraph. Modern readers would prefer shorter sentences, but – yet again – some of the character of the text is lost when the flowing phrases are cut up.

The translator must also beware of ‘false friends’. Many words have changed their meaning over the centuries. Translators need to read widely in literature written at the same period as the text they are translating, to learn the idiom of the time and how words were used. Dictionaries and a thesaurus are essential tools.

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that no two translators agree on the best translation of a text. Many students are disturbed to find how much translations of the same text can differ, and assume that one must be ‘right’ and the others ‘wrong’. Every translator knows that there is no ‘right’ translation of a text; every translation is ‘wrong’ to some degree. The question is – how much is it wrong? Because only an expert in the original language can answer that question, the best way to find out the accuracy of a translation is to learn the original language and then translate it yourself!

Conclusion

Primary sources are historians’ raw material, on which our analysis of the past is based. Through studying primary sources, historians develop their own interpretation of past events, rather than being reliant on other scholars’ work. Yet, as this chapter has shown, the printed historical documents that students analyse at university have already been through many stages of interpretation. They have been selected from a vast number of other possible documents and then converted into a form suitable to read on a printed page. Illustrations and annotations from the original document have probably been removed. The printed document may be a combination of several surviving versions of the document, which have been critically analysed by the editor and assembled to produce the ‘best’ text. Documents may have been further interpreted through being translated, or through supporting analysis by the editor.

With all this in mind, students may decide that they would prefer to go back to the original documents, rather than relying upon the judgement and guidance of the unseen editor. Of course, they will then have to learn editorial skills for themselves. Alternatively, they may read the editor’s introduction critically, note what the editor tells them about the editorial process, and then analyse the edition as thoroughly as they would analyse an original document. In doing this, they will develop their own skills as historians.

Study Questions

- Why is it important for students to understand the processes of selection and interpretation involved in producing collections of documents, critical editions and translations?
- What kinds of historical skills must editors and translators deploy when producing such collections?
- What kinds of historical skills must students deploy when interpreting sources taken from such collections?

Notes

- 1 Much of this chapter is based on my research for my edition of *The Proceedings Against the Templars in the British Isles*, 2 vols (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
- 2 J.M. Bennett (1999) *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295–1344* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill College).
- 3 For further discussion of some of the problems set out below, see P.D.A. Harvey (2001) *Editing Historical Records* (London: British Library); R.F. Hunnisett (1977) *Editing Records for Publication* (London: British Records Association).
- 4 See, for example, R. Vaughan (1994) *The Illustrated Chronicles of Matthew Paris: Observations of Thirteenth-Century Life*, new edn (Stroud: Sutton); S. Lewis (1987) *The Art of Matthew Paris in the “Chronica Majora”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); J-B. de Vaivre and L. Vissière (eds) (2014) *Tous les diables d’enfer: relations du siege de Rhodes par les Ottomans en 1480* (Geneva: Droz); illuminations, integral to the original text, are published as plates separately from the text.
- 5 For example, D. Munro (2013) *A German Third Crusader’s Chronicle of His Voyage and the Siege of Almohad Silves, 1189 AD/ Muwahid Xelb, 585 AH (De Itinere Navali)*. No place: Antimony), includes black and white photographs in the printed book, and a colour reproduction of the sole manuscript in the e-book.
- 6 R.G.W. Anderson and J. Jones (eds) (2012) *The Correspondence of Joseph Black*, 2 vols (Farnham: Ashgate).
- 7 For further discussion, see, for example, R.B.C. Huygens (2000) *Ars Edendi: A Practical Introduction to Editing Medieval Latin Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols).
- 8 W. Roach (ed.) (1952–1983) *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, 5 vols (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society), vols 1–3. The *Continuations* were composed between c. 1191 and c. 1230.
- 9 R.H.C. Davis (1973) ‘William of Tyre’, in D. Baker (ed.), *Relations Between East and West in the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 71.

Further Reading

- R.G.W. Anderson and J. Jones (eds) (2012) *The Correspondence of Joseph Black*, 2 vols (Farnham: Ashgate).
- J.M. Bennett (1999) *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295–1344* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill College).
- R.H.C. Davis (1973) ‘William of Tyre’, in D. Baker (ed.), *Relations Between East and West in the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 64–76.
- P.D.A. Harvey (2001) *Editing Historical Records* (London: British Library).
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- R.B.C. Huygens (2000) *Ars Edendi: A Practical Introduction to Editing Medieval Latin Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols).
- S. Lewis (1987) *The Art of Matthew Paris in the “Chronica Majora”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).
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