

A Text Formation Primer

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Ancient texts, unlike modern ones, may grow in several ways. Here are examples of the commonest modes of text formation in all the antiquities.

A/AFTER. The easiest place to add something to a text is **at the end**, like a letter postscript. It is the commonest mode of text growth.

1. The **Gortyn Law Code** was engraved on the walls of the city hearing chamber. We still possess the original stones.¹ The laws are in three groups. The first has a logical sequence, the second supplements them, the third adds further refinements. The content of the last two groups suggests updating. This is proved for the third group, which is *in a different handwriting*.

2. **Mwòdž 17-19**, three tracts giving the Mician school's view of war, begin with total opposition (MZ 17, 0390), continue with an argument from cost (MZ 18, 0362), and conclude with acceptance of "righteous war" (MZ 19, 0326). These are changes in the views of the sub-elite Micians, as they gradually assimilated to elite values.²

3. To the **Isaiah** core (Isa 1-39, pre-Exilic) was added Deutero (Isa 40-55, Exilic) and Trito (Isa 56-66, post-Exilic), each adjusting former doctrine to changing times.³

B/BEFORE. New material can be placed **at the head**, not the tail, of a text. That first contact can powerfully affect future readers' perception of all that follows.⁴

4. When Horace arranged his first collection of Carmina (the present Books I-III), for publication, he placed first a poem of gratitude to his patron Maecenas.

5. **Jwāngdž 8**, the first of three Primitivist chapters, argues that webbed toes or an extra finger are natural, and should be accepted; it opposes all forced standardization. A preposed paragraph *urges the opposite*: such irregularities should be removed.⁵

6. The seven-day creation story in **Genesis 1** precedes and contrasts with the older Eden story, Genesis 2-3, and gives cosmic sanction to the seven-day Sabbath custom.

¹Some of them damaged (they were repurposed in antiquity); photos in Willetts **Gortyn**.

²See Brooks **MZ 17-19**, and for the larger situation, Brooks **Ethical**. These separate texts function as stages in a continuous doctrinal development; compare Deuteronomy, #25 below.

³For a review of scholarly opinion, see Williamson **Book 1-3**.

⁴It may seem that preposed material cannot outweigh, in the reader's mind, all that follows. But a new reader has *not yet seen* what follows. See in detail Brooks **Original** Appendix 5.

⁵Probably prompted by Mencius 6A12, which notes that someone with a crooked finger would go any distance to find a doctor to straighten it, so he can be like other people.

C / CONCENTRIC. Material may be added at **both the head and tail** of a text, either successively or as a one-time framing device. This keeps the ends of the work mutually compatible, and gives an impression of unity of thought in an evolving text.

7. **Rgveda** 2-8, the “family books” plus the Soma Pavamāna hymns of Book 9, are bookended by books 1 and 10, the latter containing some of the latest material.⁶

8. **Shāng-jyŵn Shū** (“The Book of Lord Shāng”) grew concentrically, on a core at SJS 10-11 The final **SJS 1** (adapting an earlier story)⁷ and **26** added Lord Shāng’s name to the text, which up to then had been only tacitly associated with him.

9. **1 Peter**, a widely distributed baptismal homily, responded to the expulsion of Jesus followers from synagogues (c85) by adding material at the head (**1:1-2**) and tail (**4:12-5:11**) of the text to address the new emergency (“the fiery trial among you”), transforming the old homily into a message of encouragement and reaffirmation.⁸

D / DISTINCTIVE MATERIAL: INTERPOLATIONS . A passage may stand out as different in tone or content from its surroundings, or interrupt a narrative flow. These are probably interpolations. How do they arise? An author may insert new material to homogenize a text whose doctrine is evolving; an editor may add a variant of a popular tale; an enemy may post a refutation. If you remove a suspect passage, and the adjacent passages become consecutive, like your finger when you take a splinter out, *that* was interpolation.

10. Readers of Caesar’s **Gallic War** may have noticed the part near the beginning; from “Eorum illa pars,” which gives an outline of the geography of Gaul. Removing it leaves a continuous account of Orgetorix and the Helvetii.⁹

11. The **Shān Jīng** (“Classic of Mountains”) was at first a resource map of China. Later, those mountains began to be peopled by interpolated strange beings. The Hàn librarians, aware of the danger of such interpolations, had recorded wordcounts for each chapter of the text. Once these interpolated strange beings have been removed, the wordcounts once again match the original, uninterpolated text.¹⁰

12. Israel left Egypt in haste, their mixing-bowls on their backs (Exod 12:34). Later, they give so much treasure to the Tabernacle that the collection was halted (Exod 35:20-36:7). Where did all that stuff come from? Someone went through the text and explained how, before they left, the people had “despoiled the Egyptians” of their treasures (**Exod 3:21-22, 11:2, 12:35-36**), thus making the story consistent.

⁶See the introduction to Jamison and Brereton **Rigveda**.

⁷For JGT 6, the source of SJS 1, see Duyvendak **Book** 167n.

⁸See Beare **First**. The bookending passages also claim Petrine authorship of the whole.

⁹There are other such interpolation at 6:25-28, a description of the Hercynian forest and its animals and elsewhere, perhaps added to make the text more geographically useful.

¹⁰Nor was this the end. To the five chapters of the original “Mountains” survey there were added chapters on places *beyond* China, the expanded work being called the Shān/Hǎi Jīng (“Classic of Mountains and Seas”); in them, the incredible beings simply take over the text. Centuries later, the text had become mere recreational reading, and was no longer of any economic importance. Contrast the Gallic War example (#16 above), where a narrative account was modified by added material, to give useful information on foreign lands and peoples.

A FINAL CONSIDERATION

If you are in charge of a growth text, where do you stop? An accumulation may reach a satisfying total number, which will then be protected against further additions – or maybe not.

13. The Iliad, the story of the Wrath of Achilles, logically ends at Iliad 22, the death of Hector and the mourning of his wife. Later, there were added **Iliad 10** (the manifestly late Doloneia) and **23-24**, which go beyond the original plan, returning Hector's body to Priam, reconciling Greeks and Trojans, and all but ending the war. To compensate for these additions, two earlier chapters were pushed together as one at three places (easily located; they produce chapters twice as long as the Iliad norm). In preserving that total number, the Iliad acknowledges the power of 24, which is the number of letters in the Greek alphabet. The first lays of Troy were undoubtedly oral, but "Homer," the author of our Iliad, seems to be operating in an age of writing.

14. The Shī corpus of Chinese court poetry expanded until it included 300 poems, all of them telling of the glory of the Jōu tradition. The later addition of poems glorifying Confucius' state Lǔ forced the elimination of six poems previously included (the Máu commentary preserves their titles and general purport). Still later, when five poems supposedly from the earlier Shāng Dynasty appeared, their addition was not accepted by all parties. Those who did accept them numbered them as **Shī 301-305**, giving up the previous attempt to protect the old total.

15. Szmǎ Tán's Shǐ Jì was planned as a double sixty: 120 chapters. Of these, 30 (SJ 31-60) were allotted to hereditary rulerships. Unfortunately, during the course of the work, the Emperor created new hereditary kingships for some of his sons. Tán added them as SJ 60 ("The Three Kings"), but compensated by pushing together two previously written chapters, on Gwǎn and Tsài, as the present **SJ 34**. Tán's son Chyēn, on taking up the unfinished Shǐ Jì, added ten collective biographies to the last half of the work. No compensation was made, and the Shǐ Jì now stands at 130 chapters.

16. The Psalms had reached a satisfactory total of 150, but two Maccabean Psalms, responding to the 0168 desecration of the Temple under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, demanded to be included; they are now Psalms **74** and **79**. Room was made for them by eliminating the last Korah Psalm, just before the two Ezrahite Psalms, Psa 88-89 (notice the double heading of Psa 88), and pushing two others together as one.

In Conclusion

The patterns of text formation mentioned here are nothing new; they have been known to scholarship since antiquity. For interpolations, we have Zenodotus and the other Alexandrian critics (the Iliad); for detecting spurious texts, Stilo (on Seneca) and Valla (on the Donation of Constantine, a forgery of Charlemagne's time); for early versions underlying late texts, Lachmann (again the Iliad). We offer these examples, most of them already familiar in their respective fields, as reminders of what is gained by taking into consideration more than one ancient literature.

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