

# Media transmitting texts

In the history of literacy, mankind has used many different types of media for [transmitting](#) literary texts. Although it is important for textual critics to have an understanding of how [texts](#) came into being and were transmitted, only some general points of this very long history can be mentioned here. In order to embrace the whole picture, several disciplines must be combined: history and sociology of literacy (including orality) and scholarship, study of the materiality of [manuscripts](#) and printed documents ([codicology](#)), study of handwriting systems used in those documents ([palaography](#)), study of the history of libraries and archives, etc. Any technological, ideological or intellectual changes in the history of media may have affected the history of the transmitted texts.

The ancient near east has left us libraries full of texts written on clay tablets, other media where certainly in existence but have not come down to us. The exact date when literacy becomes an important factor in Greece is disputed. The Homeric poems have clearly lived as oral tradition for a long time before they were written down. Some scholars have questioned the traditional assumption that they were written down as early as in the 8th century and assumed that this happened first at the end of the 6th c. BC. Others believe, however, that the poets who first wrote down the Homeric poems lived earlier than that and that Hesiod too used writing when he composed his poems. Books remained something of a rarity in Greece until well into the 5th c. BC.

In the late Roman republic and in the early empire literary works were still supposed to be heard and not read silently. In imperial Rome public recitations was an important way for an author to publish his work. The extent of literacy in the Roman world is disputed, but it is clear that the ability to read was much more common than the ability to write correctly. We have private letters from the Roman empire which have been dictated to scribes, thus indicating lacking or partly lacking literacy, and we have private letters written in good Latin by the private persons themselves, which seem to imply a rather diffused degree of literacy.

In the early middle ages it is, however, clear that the extent of literacy decreased considerably: it is therefore likely that recitations of texts increased in importance during that period.

The earliest examples of writing are found on objects made of stone, metal or clay. Wood was used too and wooden tablets covered with wax were frequently used in antiquity from the 6th c. BC onwards. Book scrolls made of leather seem to have been used when some of the earliest Greek texts were written down, but from the 5th century BC they tended to be replaced by the less expensive papyrus scrolls. The papyrus scroll was the form for books used in the famous library founded at Alexandria in the Hellenistic period and it would remain the most important one for several centuries.

Parchment as a material used for books is known from the 3rd century BC and was connected to the Hellenistic kingdom of Pergamon and the library founded there. With the use of this material there is also a change from the scroll to the codex. We have some fragments of parchment codices from the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, but it is from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD that the tendency to replace papyrus scrolls by parchment codices grows stronger. This change of writing material was of importance for the transmission of the classical Greek and Roman literature, since practically only the texts which were copied on parchment had a chance of surviving into the middle ages and into the modern era. Some papyri containing such texts have, however, survived in the dry climate of Egypt. Papyrus remained in use in late antiquity, but it was of less importance in the middle ages. From the 11th and 12th centuries AD, paper was used with increasing frequency in the production of books.

Parchment was very expensive and as a result, some such manuscripts were re-used: the first writing was removed by washing or scraping and another text was written on it. Such a manuscript is called a *palimpsest*.

The kind of writing used changed too. In the earliest phase there were only the capital letters which got their refined and elegant forms in the classical periods in Greece (5th and 4th centuries BC) and in Rome (1st century BC). Minuscule writing systems (spreading letters between four imaginary lines, not two) replaced the majuscule systems in both Greek and Latin in the early middle ages. This again was an important bottle-neck for texts to pass: those who did not get transcribed into minuscule were nearly all lost.

## References

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## In other languages

DE: textüberliefernde Medien  
FR: médias  
IT: supporti scrittori / media

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