

The Impact of Printing on History Writing and Historical Thinking

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Ever since Elizabeth Eisenstein's work on the printing revolution, scholars have studied the impact of print on various aspects of European culture and knowledge, including the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Eisenstein and her critics have debated how print shaped the intellectual content of these movements. Was printing the crucial factor in diffusing and concretizing early modern knowledge or did printing exist in a larger manuscript culture of unstable texts. One subject missing from these discussions of the impact of print has been printing's effect on the writing of history and the presentation of historical documents. At first glance, the printing of history writing may not be as significant as the diffusion of heretical ideas, the formation of standard editions, or the ability to share and edit experimental data. Nevertheless, after Gutenberg access to history and its sources was almost exclusively through print. That change—or the potential influence of that change-- must be studied systematically. This paper will set out that program by addressing the following questions: Did printed books make the reader think differently about the veracity or authenticity of historical narrative? How did the inclusion of printed primary sources in appendices or separate volumes shape the readers' perceptions of the building blocks of historical narrative and analysis? How did print contribute to the creation and control of archives and national historical collections? How did printed illustrations of historical events shape collective memory about events or about the fixity or fluidity of historical time in general? Ultimately, these initial questions will help us gauge what role the material culture of print played in early modern historical thinking.