

The Building-Blocks theory, or how to make sense of Slavic textual transmission

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The historical-critical method that, with some modifications, has been traditionally used for making critical editions of ancient texts has proved to be difficult to apply to the Slavic tradition. The reason for this difficulty lies in the different ways in which texts were transmitted in the Slavic Orthodox realm.

The historical-critical methodology was based on two principles that did not necessarily occur in the Slavic realm: first, that the copyist could alter the text if he felt there was a need for it (which accounted for the interventions, and not errors) and the idea that the minimal unit under study was the word, that together with concepts of authorship (commentaries and glosses) and the arrival of the printing press contributed to create a scenario to which the historical-critical method tried to provide satisfactory answers. Therefore, the methodology that was, and still is, valid for editing Greek and Latin works in Western Europe is proved inadequate for Slavic ones. The different way in which a Slavic Orthodox scribe approached a text, from the theological tenets to the different chronology of survival of the manuscript tradition, should force us to re-evaluate which aspects of the historical-critical method are still useful to produce critical editions of Slavic texts and which are not.

Since the intervention of the copyist was necessarily kept to a minimum—due to sacrality of the text itself—and glosses, commentaries or abridgement are rare, the main form of alteration in the process of textual transmission was the addition or expurgation of whole parts of the text in order to produce any innovation in the received text. Moreover, Old Church Slavonic, being a sacred language linked to a supra-national religion, was particularly stable and conservative, only permeable to certain geographic variants that did not evolve, however, into vernaculars. Taking into account all these specificities of the Slavic tradition, and not wanting to content ourselves with diplomatic editions, I have studied the possibility of replicating the Slavic copyists' habits in an attempt of trying to make justice both to the diversity and large number of manuscripts available, as well as to the methodology used by them in the process. In this sense, I have taken the sentence, even the paragraph, as unit of change, and not the word, since the variance between words could only respond in Slavic Orthodox tradition to either a scribal error, often corrected in a later edition, or a geographic-dialectal variant. Each portion of text that was added or expurgated was, however, the only means the scribe had to intervene upon the text, and therefore, if we want to understand the survival of a text from a historical and critical point of view, this should be the privileged area of study. These portions I have called “building blocks” and it is the study of their choice and collocation that I hope will open new perspectives in producing critical editions of Slavic texts.