

MY INTERST/INTRO

Hi, my name is Matt and in my day job, I teach religion classes to high school students. Some of these classes involve studying the KJV of the Bible. One of the questions I’m asked every year in these classes is “what is that weird, backwards P thing at the beginning of some verses?” I’ve just always told them that it was a symbol showing where the paragraphs were in the earlier texts – which is basically true. But what is that symbol really? Does it have a name? Where did it come from? How was that symbol decided on? Why don’t we use it in other texts today? And has it impacted the way we currently write? All these questions have intrigued me, but I’ve never taken the time to actually figure them out...until now!

Music ¶

HISTORY/HOW IT CAME

At first glance, it seems really obvious. It’s a fancy, backwards P and paragraph starts with P – so it’s just a neat abbreviation of the word paragraph. Right? WRONG!

Believe it or not, this thing has a way more interesting and storied history than you would expect. Today, it’s technically called the “pilcrow” which to us sounds like a villain from a B-rated comic book, but it’s actually corruption through various languages all traced back to the Ancient Greek word “paragraphos”.... the same root word for our English word ‘paragraph’. But ‘paragraphos’ to the Ancient Greeks meant something completely different than paragraph does to us.

To us, it’s a whole grouping of sentences surrounded by white space showing that the sentences are related to each other in theme....pretty standard writing convention in English. But to the Greeks, paragraphos was actually a symbol.

In their earliest writings, all the text (both letters and words) would run together. And it was the job of the reader to try and read the text out loud and make meaning of it for their audience. Punctuation was done orally by the reader, not textually by the writer. In the 4th century BC, this is literally what the writers started doing to make the readers work easier. They would draw a small horizontal or angled line to the left of text to try and indicate that there should be a break in the reading. The reason for the breaks could be varied and changed on the whims of the author – but usually had something to do with a change in topic or the structure of whatever was being written about.

These line markings are what were called “paragraphos.” The word paragraphos can be broken down into two parts: “para” which means “beside” and “graphein” which means “to write.” So our modern word ‘paragraph’ literally means “to write beside” because that’s where the paragraphos symbols were written.

My pic
Bible
KJV screenshot
circled

Pilcrow

Question marks

P = pilcrow

X

‘pilcrow’
Pilcrow comic?

‘paragraphos’

Show paragraph

ALLTEXTBOTHLETTE
RSANDWORDS
(picture)

Horizontal line

‘para’ =
‘graphein’ =

<p>So the “idea” of the modern paragraph (the grouping of common sentences together) has retained basically the same name ‘paragraph’ over the years, but the “symbol” paragraphos itself has undergone quite an evolution in both name and appearance over time – and the fact that it looks like a backwards P (the first letter in the word paragraphos) is only a strange coincidence!</p>	<p>Pic – more paragraphos</p> <p>X thru P</p>
<p>As I mentioned earlier, the technical name ‘pilcrow’ we use today originated with Greek paragraphos....but was corrupted over time as it traveled from Greek, into these various terms in Old French, and by 1440 came into use in English as plicrafte....but it continued to evolve from there until we now hear the symbol called the “PILCROW” in modern English. Quite the journey!</p>	<p>OF: paragraphe, pelegraphe, pelagreffe</p> <p>ENG: plicrafte, pilcrow</p>
<p>If you thought its name went on a wild ride, wait until you see what happens to the actual symbol over time. What started in the 4th Century BC as horizontal lines began to take on more varied forms like these shown here. Some texts even got rid of the symbol altogether and instead they would use large first letters of each sentence. In many instances, the letter K began to be used (which was an abbreviation for the Latin word, ‘kaput’ which means ‘head’). This early letter K is the symbol that would eventually hold on and become the beginning of today’s pilcrow.</p>	<p>‘Γ’ and ‘γ’</p> <p>Show K’s picture ‘kaput’ = head K.....pilcrow</p>
<p>Over the next millennium, it would be the introduction of Christianity that would enshrine the pilcrow as a necessary writing technology. This was because early Christians, especially, wanted to pass down the word of God with exactness....without the need for interpretation and punctuation by the reader. Throughout this millennium, the K for kaput was eventually replaced by scribes in the monasteries with C for capitulum or “little head”taking the lead from all the other earlier Roman changes from K to C.</p>	<p>Early christians</p> <p>Monks scribes</p>
<p>These scribes in the monasteries worked like a book factory – each scribe honing a specific skill and then working to mass produce the text. One scribe would write out the main body of the scripture, leaving blank spaces for another scribe called a ‘rubricator’ (literateally means to color red) to later adorn the text by adding the large fancy first letters, headings, and other section marks as needed. These rubricators found ways to ‘accessorize’ the C like they did other letters by using a vertical bar in the day’s fashion; Eventually, another bar was added and the left-side bowl was filled in...completing the transition from the original horizontal line, through the letter K and C....eventually becoming it’s own symbol The PILCROW! Which just happens to look like a backwards P...but isn’t!</p>	<p>‘capitulum’ = little head</p> <p>monks</p> <p>Fancy texts (red)</p> <p>Evolution of C</p>
<p><u>IMPACT ON LITERACY/EDUCATION</u> How did this new technology affect texts over time? At first, space was a premium, so the pilcrow was used to cram lots of text onto one page, but still preserve the idea of ‘paragraphs’ by breaking up the text by theme or related sentences. Eventually as paper became more readily available, writers began putting a blank line to signify a new paragraph – but still with a pilcrow at the beginning so everyone knew what they were doing. But then, at the height of</p>	<p>Crammed in text with pilcrows</p> <p>Lines with pilcrows starting</p>

<p>their illustrious, important career, the pilcrow committed what researcher Keith Houston calls “typographical suicide”.</p> <p>Houston goes on to describe what he means....and what it meant for our writing technology. He says, “Taking pride of place at the head of every new paragraph, the pilcrow had carved out a literal niche for itself at the heart of late medieval writing. Boldly inked by the rubricator, pilcrows grew ever more elaborate and time-consuming to add. Unfortunately the deadline is not a modern invention; occasionally, time would run out before the rubricator could complete his work and the white space carefully reserved for the pilcrow went undecorated. With the advent of the printing press, the volume of printed documents to be rubricated grew exponentially and it became increasingly difficult to attend to them all. The pilcrow [as we’ve seen it at the beginning of each paragraph] became a ghost, and the indented paragraph was born in its stead.” And the indent has been kept and used for hundreds of years – impacting how each of us subconsciously processes text as we read it.</p> <p><u>CURRENT USE</u></p> <p>So there you have it – the not-so-obvious backstory behind the pilcrow! It’s not just a backwards P!</p> <p>Today, it’s become almost completely obsolete except in a couple very niche uses (like the KJ Bible I mentioned earlier). But it’s also still used by proofreaders showing where a group of text should be broken up into another paragraph. Legal documents also use it in concert with section markers to help find specific passages in the document. Perhaps most notably, modern word processors (like Microsoft Word) often have feature to access the hidden or formatting characters....things like spaces and tabs that help give the document it’s structure. And in honor of the paragraph’s heritage, the word processors use the pilcrow symbol behind the scenes to show each the time “ENTER” key is struck to create a new line. And its especially fitting that in many of these word processors, the button used to access these hidden characters is represented using the pilcrow symbol itself – cementing its place as the archetype of all the ‘hidden’ punctuation that, though important inventions in their own time, we now take for granted in our modern text technologies.</p>	<p>Fancy pilcrows</p> <p>Printing press</p> <p>Indents</p> <p>X thru P</p> <p>Bible</p> <p>Proofreaders</p> <p>Legal doc</p> <p>Show hidden characters</p> <p>Button with pilcrow</p>
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