

WRITING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Although medieval sources exhibit highly numerous forms of writing, varying with time and place, one script can nevertheless be acknowledged to have prevailed for nearly four centuries, to the extent of dominating all the others. It is called "Carolingian minuscule," from Carolus, the medieval name of King Charlemagne, under whose reign it was developed. Inspired by various styles then in use, it rose along with the European expansion of the Frankish empire and continued to mature until the moment when changes in both usage and style triggered the rapid, bursts of development that characterized it during the final three centuries of the Middle Ages. Since this chapter can hardly aspire to cover the entire field of these medieval scripts, it will focus on the central period, running from the imperial coronation of Charlemagne (800) to the rise of the University of Paris (thirteenth century).

THE RISE OF COPYISTS' WORKSHOPS

Some clarification and qualification of two often repeated ideas is required: the first is that Charlemagne "invented" schools, and the second is that Carolingian script arose at Corbie in northern France in the late eighth century.

Charlemagne's reign has been sufficiently studied to permit a more accurate description of his efforts in the realm of schools and writing. His qualities as a statesman are indisputable. He is often said to have been uncultured because his biographer, Eginhard, reported that at the end of his life Charlemagne tried to learn the alphabet. This overlooks the fact that political genius can be found among monarchs who do not display marks of culture but who are perfectly able to understand the value of a policy that favors intellectual activities even though they do not

themselves master them. Right from the start of his reign, Charlemagne went often to Italy and surely recognized its cultural as well as its political wealth. On the death of his most beloved wife, Hildegard, in 783, not only did he sponsor the drafting of the *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium*—a history of the bishops of Metz featuring a forebear, Arnulf, and his family—but the writer commissioned by Charlemagne (or his closest adviser, Bishop Angilramn of Metz) was a Lombard, Paul the Deacon. This occurred at a time when the Carolingian government was opening itself to the outside world, most clearly through expansion into Saxony, yet in fact extensively in every direction, including northern Spain, the Anglo-Saxon lands, Bavaria, and Italy. The Frankish king, realizing the importance of writing, wanted a refined language and proper books, and he therefore promoted an increase in the number of teaching institutions.

A detailed capitulary of regulations, drafted in 789 and known as the *Admonitio generalis*, contained all the measures that led to the subsequent cultural boom (Fig. 1). To simplify somewhat, we might say that a concern for the political unification of the Frankish world was spurred by the diversity of the regions governed and first called for the religious and liturgical unity that had already begun in the days of Saint Boniface and Carloman and was then pursued under Pippin the Short and Chrodegang (Bishop of Metz from 742 to 766). To achieve this it was necessary to Romanize the form of worship and, therefore, the books required by the liturgy. This cultural campaign began slowly in the final decade of the eighth century, and its various manifestations were reflected in the rise of the palace school that drew intellectuals from England, Spain, Italy, and Aquitaine, in the importation of Roman manuscripts, and in the founding—within religious communities, monasteries,

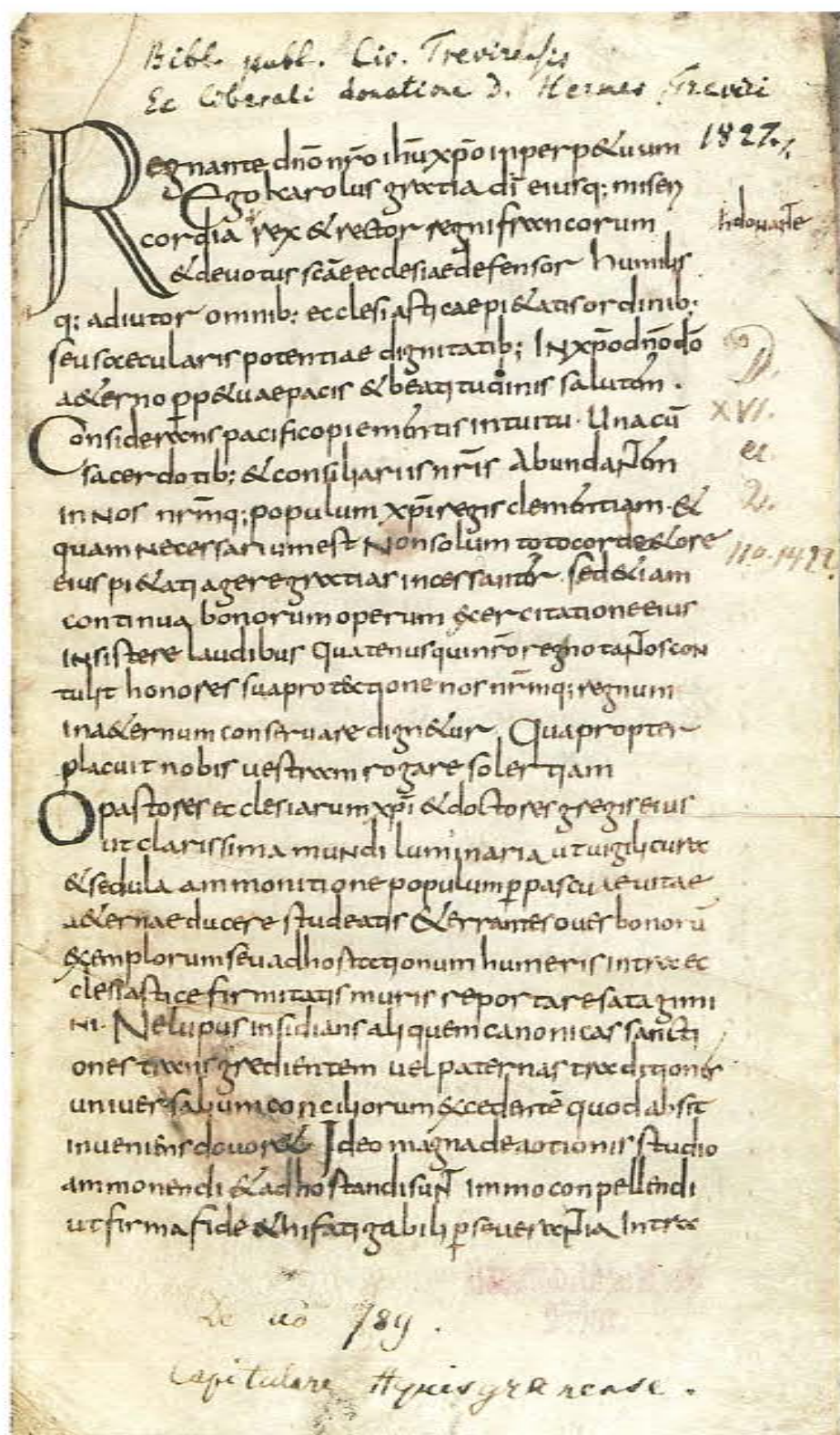


Fig. 1. This capitulary of 789 CE, titled *Admonitio generalis*, is considered to be the founding text of the Carolingian Renaissance and was written in a script that remained common until the end of the eleventh century. Ms. 1202/501, fol. 1r, Stadtbibliothek, Trier.

ram sor te gratulante munici diuinet
 tringet iniuria nihil ex tra ordinariū e
 uel super indicium placitetur nulla pon
 instauratio nulla translationum solliciti
 cignatur non autum cetera quæ talia pō
 postremo nihil quod præter canonicam inl

Fig. 2. Roman writing bequeathed to the Franks a fine script with rounded forms called uncial, both upper- and lower-case. The shape of most Roman letters was retained, as seen in this detail from the *Concilia minora Galliae*, seventh to eighth century CE. Ms. Phill. 745, fol. 111v, Berlin.

and chapter-houses—of schools where respect for the Latin language was taught (Figs. 2 and 3). Pupils had to learn grammar (the first of the liberal arts), to speak decently, and, thanks to those skills, to copy books correctly and disseminate them. This thrust triggered what has rather misleadingly been called the Carolingian Renaissance but was really only the Franks' dawning awareness of the heavily Romanized culture of nearby lands. Writing played a key role in that development.

The other commonly stated idea that needs qualifying concerns the supposed emergence of Carolingian script at the monastery of Corbie in the late eighth century. Why should it have arisen at Corbie in particular? People had never stopped writing and copying books—there is no doubt about that—but letters traced by a hand that wrote without halting led to texts that were hard to decipher. Meanwhile, on the fringes of the Frankish world, from Benevento to Canterbury, people were acquiring a taste for

Ep̄la ad Thessalonicē II

Paulus
 & Siluanus &
 Timotheus & ceteris
 thessalonicis. In dō pa
 trenostro & dño ihu xpo p̄p̄a
 tia uobis & pax adō patrenost
 & dñi ihu xpi qui p̄
 quibus
 nobis cum. In p̄
 ihu de celo cum a
 gur in flamma
 dictam his qui non
 & qui non obediunt
 dñi ihu xpi qui p̄
 lucet in uobis & ceteris

Fig. 3. This *Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* reveals some of the special features of the script used in the British Isles in the eighth century. Note the s, for example, that appears twice in the name "Silvanus" on the second line. Werden an der Ruhr. Ms. theol. lat., fol. 366, fol. 69r, Berlin.



Fig. 4. A monastic scriptorium carried out all the tasks of a printer and publisher, delivering completed books with carefully arranged pages and colorful decoration, as seen in this ninth-century *Psalter of Saint Gall*.

a minuscule script that featured distinct, Roman-style capitals. Large angular or semi-angular letters—indeed even rounded, or uncial, hands—thus steadily gave way to smaller letters that imitated the form of capitals, taking less room on writing surfaces where space was at a premium. This minuscule script reached the Franks through imported books and was used to inform the entire kingdom of the measures taken at the general assemblies held in spring, such as the one that issued the *Admonitio* in 789. Now, it happened that the monastery in Corbie, Picardy, was very precocious in the production of books copied in this small hand, and its monks were given the main credit for inventing it. Although this religious community was indeed located at the intersection of different cultural currents, from which it could profit to teach its scribes another script, the new trend must nevertheless have been slower and more diffuse than suggested by surviving manuscripts from the period.

SCRIPTORIA

A plan of the Swiss abbey of Saint Gall (or Sankt Gallen) locates the copyists' workshop, or scriptorium, right next to the church. Such detailed information remains all too rare, yet there is absolutely no doubt about the existence of these rooms where monks kept their writing equipment and spent long hours copying books that they had borrowed or were commissioned to produce. The hard work continued even in cold weather, as one poor monk described, when hands became numb and ink froze in the inkwells, although the warming room and the chapter-house were just a few steps away. Starting in the ninth century, these scriptoria produced hundreds of liturgical books, bibles (in whole or in part, in the form of psalters and Gospels), and countless commentaries on Holy Scripture, on the prophets, on certain psalms and on each Gospel; monks also copied many books by the Fathers of

the Church as well as works by classical authors from the days of the Roman Republic and Empire (Cicero, Tacitus, Livy, Lucretius, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, and many others). If the term "Carolingian Renaissance" refers to the dissemination of classical authors, as was later the case in the later Renaissance, then the term is justified; but that is not the way it has been employed by historians, who use it above all to refer to a revival of intellectual activity and scholarship. As fate would have it, however, there was in fact a close link between the two "Renaissances": the later humanists, when rejecting the barbaric, Gothic script of the late Middle Ages, supplied printers with model letters taken from works by Latin authors, a script they thought authentic but which in fact was Carolingian. Thanks to this misconception by humanists, today we still use a "roman" typeface directly derived from a script established in the late eighth century.

In employing the term *scriptorium* to refer to a monastic workshop, we have given it a more general meaning as the site of a special way of writing, decorating, and producing manuscripts. Hence we speak of the scriptoria of Tours, Reims, Metz, Saint-Amand, Fulda, Reichenau, and Saint Gall (Fig. 4) to refer to places of production characterized by a specific way of tracing certain letters, of depicting scenes from the life of Christ, of choosing colors, and of laying out historiated initials and full pages.

Miracles of Saint Paul of Verdun (late ninth century)

I heard someone recount a miracle most surprising and strange, which happened when the prior of the place, the monastery of Saint Paul, gave him some quaternions to copy (for he was a scribe). He said that one day, when the heat of midday gave way to shadows, he went outside to do the work he had begun; that evening, he was called to supper. If he failed to arrive quickly, if the hour and repast were over, in vain would he have sought what was offered. At once, therefore, he abandoned his writing tool, the quaternion, and the book he was copying, carelessly left open. He went to sup and, as happens in such circumstances, downed more glasses than customary; overcome by the sleep that brings forgetfulness, he was taken to his bed by his dining companions. He fully profited from his night's rest, not waking a single instant, until the next day's dawn lit the dark woods and hills. While he was thus asleep, during the first nocturnal vigil there all at once began a downpour of rain that lasted until the end of night, even unto destroying orchards and ruining crops, say those who witnessed it. Awakening to all the clamor, the scribe realized that he had caused more loss than gain for the monastery. Worried on his own account, and alarmed at the loss caused to the monastery (for he had no means to pay it

back), he hastened to the spot where he would surely see the damage caused by his negligence. Reaching the spot, he saw two contrary wonders: the quaternion on which he was writing was full of water, but the open book was so spared that not a drop of the downpour had fallen on it.

— Joseph van der Straeten, *Les Manuscrits hagiographiques de Charleville, Verdun et Saint-Mihiel, avec plusieurs textes inédits* (Brussels, 1974), pp. 138–139

A SCRIBE'S TOOLS

The writing done by a scribe required the convergence of three elements: parchment, pen, and ink.

Throughout the Middle Ages, parchment was the writing surface *par excellence*. The use of papyrus—sheets made from an Egyptian plant, aligned and glued together to make wonderful, widely exported scrolls—had become increasingly rare in the early centuries following the classical period. By late antiquity, skins were coming into use. It was at Pergamum that people first developed what would be called "stuff from *Pergamentum*," or parchment. The skin of a calf or a sheep would be meticulously scraped to remove the hair on one side and the flesh on the other, soaked in an alum solution to prevent it from rotting, then stretched, dried, scraped, smoothed, polished, and finally cut according to requirements. Parchment-makers produced material that could be more or less white, more or less fine; the output of highly skilled craftsmen was of admirable quality. Today specialists can tell whether the skin came from a goat, still-born lamb, or sheep. Connoisseurs can, at the very least, distinguish by touch and sight the hair side from the flesh side, the latter having a paler color and softer surface. This difference in appearance would become important when a book was being prepared.

It was the Romans who invented the book (*codex*) that progressively replaced scrolls (*volumen*). They already used wax-covered tablets of wood, which they would bind together to make a kind of "book of wood"; by replacing these tablets with sheets of parchment, then folding and stitching the sheets, they devised the true book, discovering its numerous advantages. Scrolls did not totally disappear, however, and paintings of the evangelists at work always show them writing on a scroll. Craftsmen at a Carolingian monastery would supply the scribe with sheets of parchment, which he would cut, fold, and gather to produce volumes of greater or lesser dimensions, although always one of several standard sizes. An entire sheep skin, folded once, yielded giant books more than two feet high and nearly sixteen inches wide, some late eleventh-century examples of which survive; at the same time, the format



Fig. 5. *Bede writing* (672–735 CE). The scribe is writing in an already manufactured book; in his right hand he holds a quill and in the left a knife to sharpen the pen and to scrape any mistakes off the parchment. Ms. Yates Thompson 26.f.2, British Library, London.

might be as small as six inches by three inches. The beauty of the book required that special care be taken to make sure that facing pages came from the same side of skin (hair or flesh).

Having prepared his parchment, the scribe then took up his pens. The term *stylus*, occasionally applied to this tool, recalls the earlier use of sharpened reeds; the term *pen* here refers to the shaft—or quill—of a feather. The English word “pen” derives from the Latin word for a wing feather, *penna*, while the French term “plume,” derives from *pluma*, the name for a smaller feather. The preferred quills came from large birds, especially geese and ravens; particularly valued was the leading feather of the left wing, for the curve of the quill was best adapted to writing by right-handed scribes. Once the lower shaft was trimmed, the point was skillfully shaped, split, and sharpened so that it would retain enough ink to write several letters in a row.

A scribe consumed many quills and often had to resharpen them; his left hand would constantly hold a knife, with which he would also keep the parchment flat or scrape away some unfortunate mistake (Figs. 5 and 6).

Ink still had to be made, however. Even though widely known techniques existed, everyone had his own recipe. The basic ink was black or brown, with more or less carbon-black or acid. It should neither run nor, once dry, corrode the parchment. The use of overly acid ink sometimes produced letters that came off the parchment while leaving a highly visible mark. The best inks have retained an amazing freshness down to the present, as black as the day they were used; others have faded or taken on a less attractive brownish color. When necessary, of course, scribes knew how to make colored inks, notably red, green, and blue, in complement to the painted illustrations.

WRITING

A scribe placed the ball of his hand on the parchment and traced the letters one by one. Each letter had a generally consistent *ductus* (traced form), but this did not prevent significant variations in form (Fig. 7). A letter was composed of

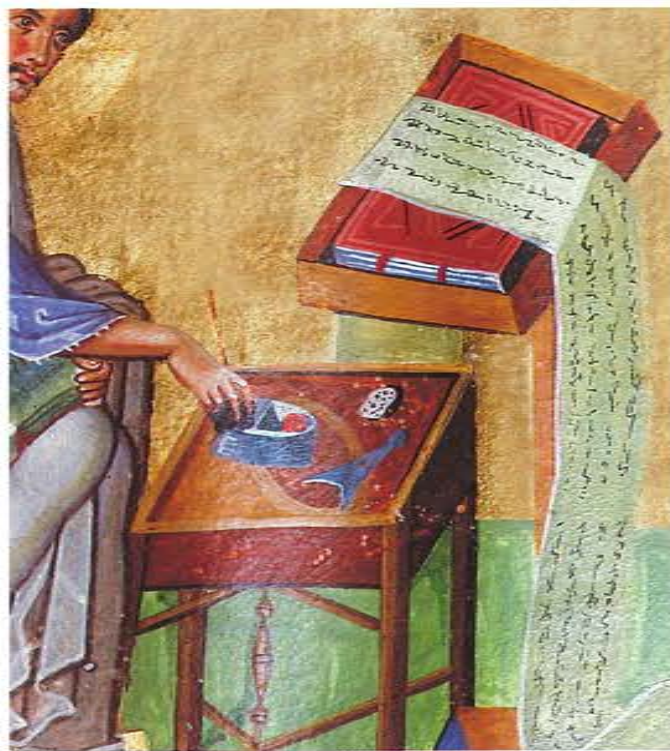


Fig. 6. Thanks to paintings of the evangelists at work—here, Saint Luke—we now have many pictures of medieval scribes, though perhaps somewhat idealized. Ms. 56, National Library, Athens.

several strokes of the pen, running from top to bottom or left to right, or perhaps even diagonally (though it was not possible to scribble arabesques or to go back and forth in any direction at will). Léon Gilissen has carefully demonstrated how letters were drawn, revealing the series of strokes that yielded the calligraphy of a stable hand. Since a letter was a well-defined form, known to all, decipherable by all, and reproduced in the same way by all copyists, texts were as uniformly readable as printed books are today. The choice of letters, their standardization, and the fact that they were clearly separated from one another meant that writing was somewhat similar to printing in its rigor and repetitiveness, indeed in its lack of inventiveness. Scribes nevertheless enjoyed enough freedom to leave their own "mark" or take certain initiatives, making it possible today to assign a text to a given scriptorium (as so admirably demonstrated by Bernard Bischoff, the most remarkable paleographer and connoisseur of Carolingian

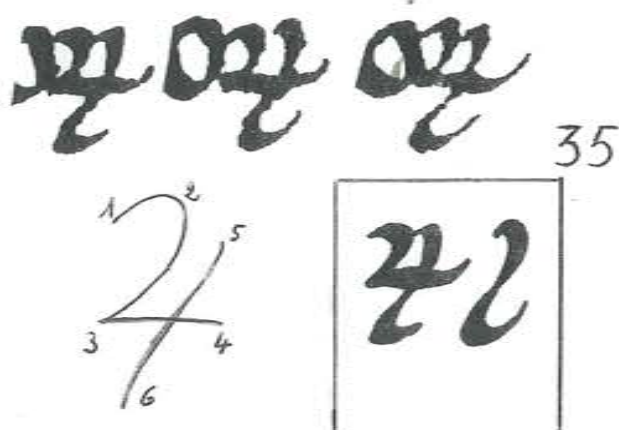


Fig. 7. An illustration of *ductus*, the way to trace a letter. Here the genitive plural ending *orum* is abbreviated to a symbol that the scribe makes with three distinct strokes of the pen (1 to 3, then 3 to 4, then 5 to 6). The pen can be drawn easily only from top to bottom or left to right.

manuscripts, able at a glance to date a work to within twenty-five years). Hence rigor existed, but so did particularities.

The alphabet adopted by the Carolingians is the same one, with only a few exceptions, as the roman typeface used today by printers. Only a few letters require comment. There were at least two ways of tracing an *a*; the shaft of a *d* could be vertical or diagonal; a *g* was probably the letter in which scribes best expressed their inventiveness, in its lower loop; the letter *r* long retained a tendency to descend below the base line; an *s* was made with two strokes, like an *f* (the double curve used for capitals was only adopted later); the letter *t* was so short that it was often confused

with *c*. Capital letters displayed greater authority, as seen in the double paunch of *B*, the belly of *D*, the angular strokes of *F*, *L*, *T* and *X*, the bars of *M*, *N*, and *V*, the large loop in *P*. Ligatures sometimes linked one letter to the next, especially *st* and *ct*, but other combinations existed, notably with the letter *r*. Scribes were also able to play with rustic capitals, or with uncial and half uncial forms.

A Carolingian scribe's hand carefully traced strokes from top to bottom; since the attack of the pen was thicker on top than on the bottom, this created a veritable club-like shape. Firmly maintaining the point at the same angle through curved strokes created thin and thick sections on ascenders and descenders (more commonly known as loops and stems).

In the early days of Carolingian script, scribes were primarily concerned to trace each letter; although letters touched, one letter was never drawn as an extension of the previous one—they remained distinct. Words therefore followed one another without being clearly separated; a break, or small white space often occurred between words, of course, but this was far from being the rule. Some texts display lettering as dense as a Roman epitaph. Only a careful reading out loud makes it possible to understand the text, the eye being unable to decipher with the ease normally afforded by a clear separation of words. Reading, in fact, was done out loud, in a murmur or boldly, depending on whether one wanted to avoid bothering a neighbor or hoped that distinct articulation would stave off distraction.

Starting in the tenth century, a new practice involved creating greater spaces between letters, to make reading easier. Then, a century later, letters were brought closer together and words became clearly distinct; "ocular" reading began to replace oral reading. In the twelfth century, the quality of writing yielded perfectly legible manuscripts, with tightly spaced letters and clearly spaced words.

During this time, the use of punctuation became widespread. Although fairly basic, it was not without significance, as the study of certain scribes' writing shows. A capital letter sometimes cued the eye to the start of a sentence. To allow readers to take a breath, a period would be placed, mid-height, to suggest a pause. Then came the semi-colon, reversed in relation to the modern one, with its comma angling to the upper right above the period. Finally, question marks made their appearance. The process was complete by the twelfth century.

One practice unfamiliar to today's readers, however, was the use of abbreviations, which continued to expand throughout the Middle Ages. Initially involving only ten per cent of words, abbreviations wound up being applied to some fifty per cent of all words, even exceeding this proportion in

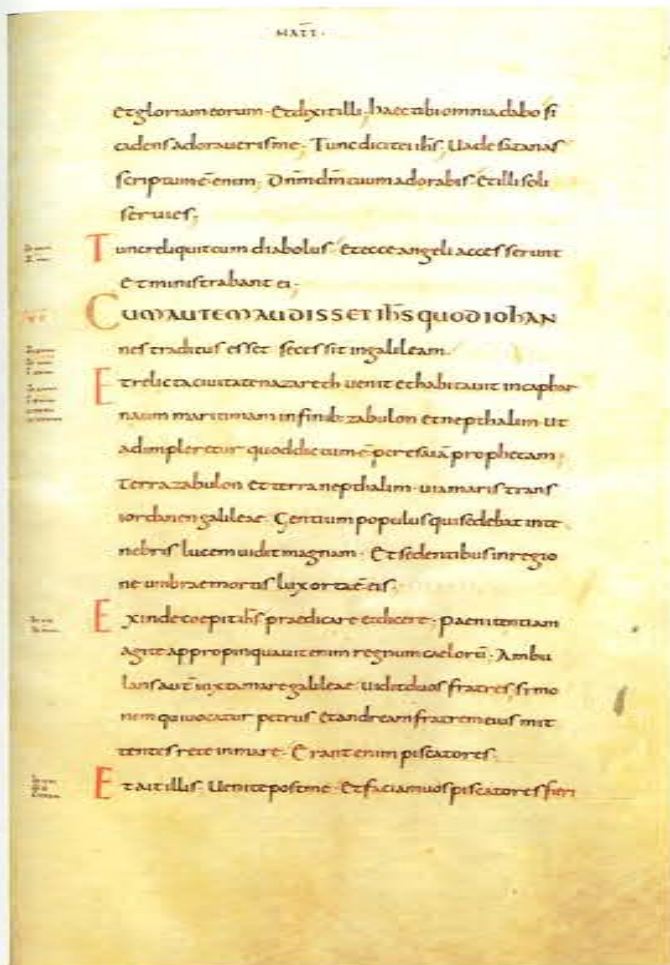


Fig. 8. This ninth-century evangelistary, or compilation of Gospels to be read during the mass, is particularly legible, although the words are not yet distinctly separated from one another. *Prüm Evangelistary*, Ms. lat. theol. fol. 733, fol. 28r, Berlin.

notes made by scholars—as is the case today with notes taken by students. Leaving aside a ligature as dense as & (for the letters *et*, meaning “and”), which could even be used in the middle of words such as *pr&ium* and *p&cator* (for *peccator*, via confusion between *t* and *c*), the most frequent early abbreviations concerned terminal *us* and *er*, certain doublings of *m* and *n*, a tilde over *p* to indicate *pre*, a bar on the stem of *p* to indicate *per*, or a loop on that same letter to signify *pro*. Around 800, the terminal *ur* in passive forms began to be abbreviated. After 1050, the number of abbreviations suddenly increased, affecting more and more words. This was also the period when scribes began placing an accent over a doubled *i*, to avoid confusion with *u*, and when they started using a dash to indicate a word-break at the end of a line.

These abbreviations were so deeply rooted in writing that they survived in early printed books. Far from simply

allowing a copyist to save space—and perhaps time—they also embodied an entire system of writing, learned along with the basic forms of letters. The use of abbreviations was a profoundly original aspect of medieval writing. Although they make decipherment more difficult for the uninitiated, there is comfort to be taken in their relative standardization of use, whose keys need merely be learned.

PAGE LAYOUT

Mindful of their readers, medieval scribes took care with the layout of the page, marking it out, signaling starting points, indicating flow, using capitals and headings,

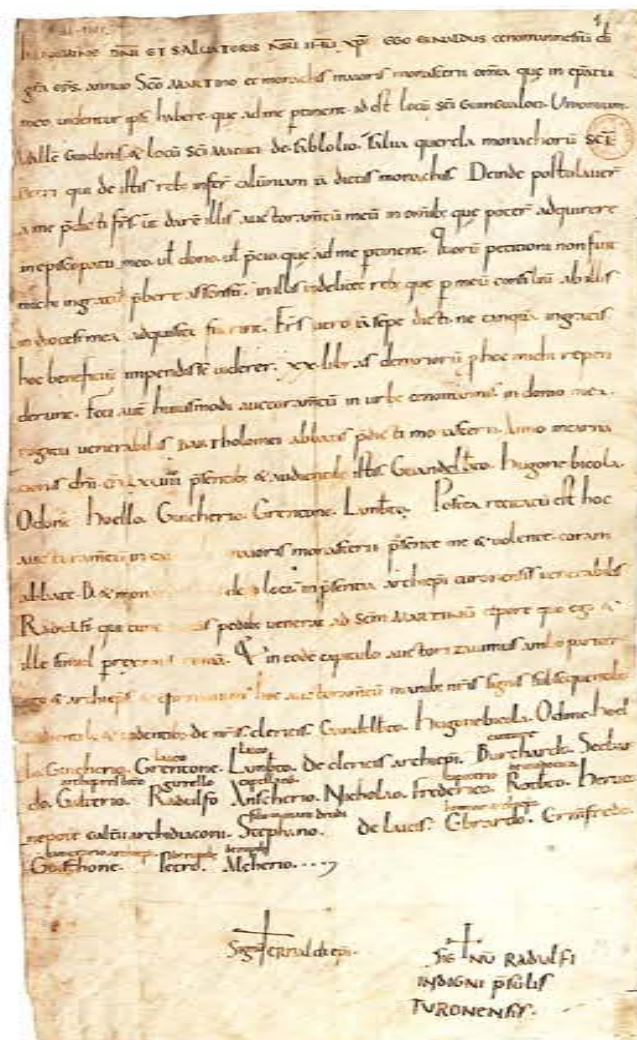


Fig. 9. Note the careful layout and writing in this ninth-century charter delivered by Ernaud, Bishop of Le Mans. The personal intervention of certain witnesses is indicated by the sign of a cross and the addition of their appellations between the lines. *Nouv. Acq. lat. 2588*, item 1, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

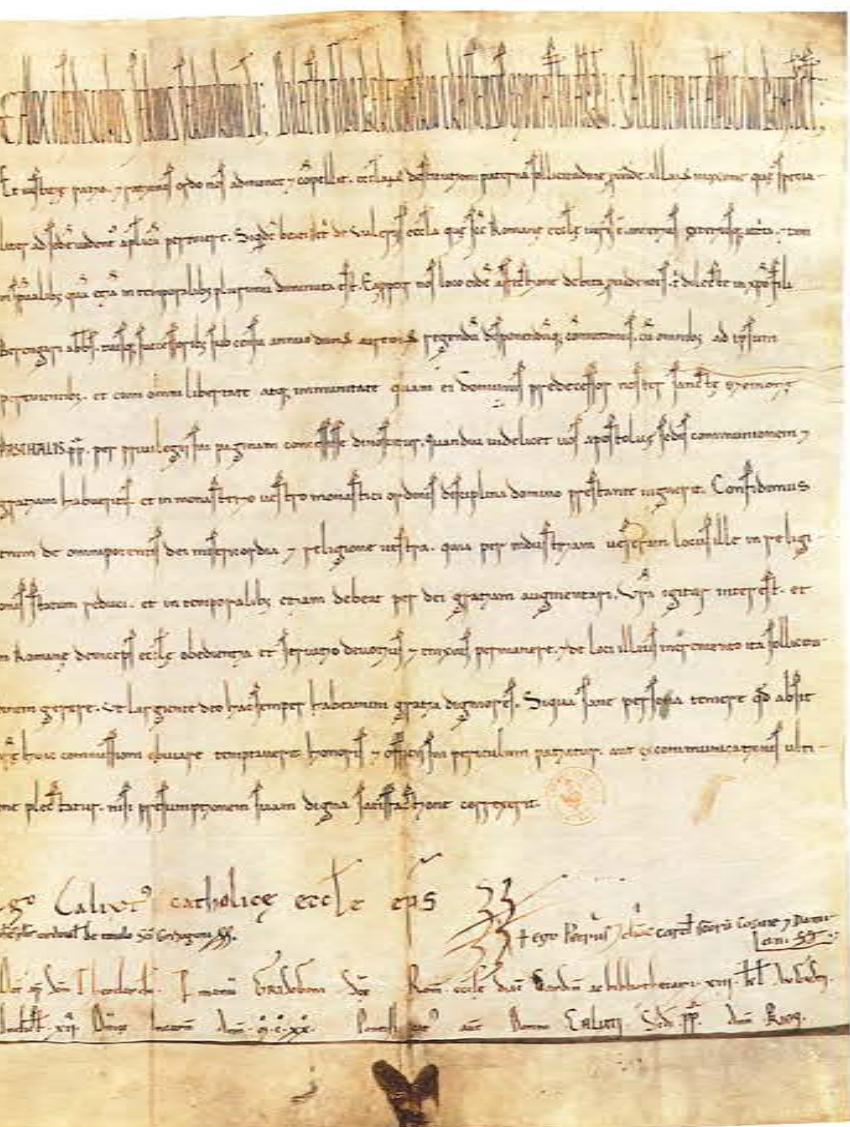


Fig. 10. To prevent forgeries, papal bulls adopted a strict format, as seen in this bull delivered by Calixtus II to Abbot Béranger of La Grasse, dated July 20, 1119. Collection Baluze 380, no. 14, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

columns and illustrations (Fig. 12). First the margins and lines had to be defined, by ruling vertical and horizontal lines either on the verso (with the aid of a dry point, which left a ridge in the parchment) or on the recto (with ink or lead point). In this way they could justify both right- and left-hand margins, and obtain uniform spacing between lines and identical page height. They would arrange the text either in long lines or in columns. Major divisions of the text would begin with a capital letter, often bold, or with an elaborate initial decorated with foliage, figurative image, or tracery. To make it easier for the reader to identify various sections, some scribes began using running headers. Here and there room would be set aside for illuminations, the scribe leaving the artist the required space and guiding him with indications in smaller writing. Such painting could be of various dimensions: small (initials), middling size (occupying part of a page), or large (a whole page). When a miniature illustrated the text, it was placed as close as possible to the relevant passage, thus playing on the relationship between word and image.

Layout assumed new importance with the invention and development of commentaries in the form of marginal glosses (Fig. 11). This practice concerned Holy Scripture as well as textbooks on grammar or law—in short, any text where a commentary proved necessary. In such cases the text under discussion often occupied a small part of the page and was written in rather large lettering; the surrounding commentaries would be written in a markedly smaller hand. A symbol placed in the text would refer to a counterpart in the marginal gloss where the commentary on that passage was located. The reader could thus shift easily from text to gloss and vice versa. Some scribes achieved quite elaborate results from this interplay.

COMPLETING THE BOOK

Once the writing was done—once the colophon had been inscribed, in which the copyist expressed in a few words or lines his joy at having finished—the book had to be completed with a sturdy binding. Gatherings (or quires) of two, three or four folded sheets—binions, ternions or quaternions—were bound together, then a strong tie was inserted in the wooden boards that protected front and back. A piece of leather sheathed it all, making a fine, uniform cover. The correct binding order of the respective

Fig. 11. A manuscript offered to the Abbey of Clairvaux by Cistercian Cardinal Pierre de Bar, thirteenth century. The main, central text is surrounded by commentary in the form of a gloss; here there are two layers of commentary. A cross-referencing system makes it possible to shift from text to commentaries.

Handwritten marginal notes in a Gothic script, likely a commentary or gloss on the main text.

Benedicite dñs qui nō est passus
ut deficeret successor familie
sue et vocaret nomen in israel et habeat
qui soletur aiam suam et nutrit ac
necesse. Denique cum alia nō est qui te diligit
et multo tibi melior est q. si sep
tem haberes filios. Sumpti q.
noemi pueri posuit in sinu sy
o et nutritis ac genule offitio su
gebatur. yvane aut mulier
quaralabant a dicente. Hic
est fili noemi. vocaverunt q. no
men ei obeh. hic est pater ysa
patriis dāmo. **H**ec sunt ge
nerationes phares. phares ge
nuit eliom. eliom aut genuit
aminadab. Amnadab genuit
naalon. Naalon genuit salmō.
Salmon genuit booz. Booz ge
nuit obeh. Obeh genuit ysa.
Ysa genuit dāmo regem;

Continuation of the main text, detailing the lineage of the characters mentioned in the previous block.

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On doit tenir la sen-
tence al arbitre que
le que ele soit loiaus
ou desloiaus. ⁊ chil qui
tel le prist nen doit blas-
mer celui non.
El plusieurs arbitre
sont en une mise ⁊
il dient diuerses senten-
ces les parties ne les ten-
ront pas se des ne noe-
lent mais se la greig-
neur partie sacorde en
une sentence il conue-
nt que ele soit tenue.
ore est la demande tele.
se voi arbitre sont en
une querelle. ⁊ li uns
gmaude q lune des par-
ties par al autre. xij.
fol. ⁊ li autres gmaude
x. fol. ⁊ li autres. v. la
que sentence doit estre
tenue. ⁊ respondu est q
li. v. doivent estre paie
car il sacentient tuit e
cele sentence.
E aucuns de chiaux
qui plaident se de-
faut pour ce que il re-
maine en lui que li ar-
bitres ne doit sacenten-
se il est tenu al arbitre.
Et pour ce la sentence
qui sera dite enderier
de chiaux qui plaident
ne uoldra riens sil ne fu
establi especialement en
la mise que sentence pe-
ust estre donee sans lun
deus ou sans ambedeus.
I apert que chil dist se-
tence par deuant les par-
ties quil le dist par deuant
chiaux qui ont sent.
car se il le dist par deuant

gatherings was assured by the use of a few words (called a signature) at the end of each quire, indicating the initial words of the next one.

In certain cases, metallic clasps held the book shut, thereby preventing the parchment from buckling. That completed the work on ordinary books, sometimes known by the color of their covers (the "white book" at the abbey of Saint-Denis, for example). Highly precious books, however, were confided to a goldsmith who enriched the cover with ivory, gemstones, and costly metalwork. The craftsman might hollow the central section of the top board in order to insert a plaque of ivory depicting a religious scene. Or he might place cabochon-cut stones on the four corners, or attach small metallic figures. Precious bindings were primarily given to the most important liturgical books, known as sacramentaries and evangelistaries (Fig. 13).

Some scriptoria were highly reputed for the quality of their work and would produce numerous copies of the same book. Thus, in France, Tours produced many bibles at the instigation of Abbot Alcuin and his successors, filling orders from rich or powerful patrons, and Saint-Amand specialized in sacramentaries. Further east, the scriptorium at Reichenau produced Gospels. These multiple copies, however, should not be perceived as the equivalent of modern mass publishing.

A book was a valuable addition to a monastic library. It might be chained down in the church, to prevent it being moved or stolen, or it might be placed flat in an *armaria* (chest) under the control of an *armarius* (librarian), to whom the monks applied for books. The Rule of Saint Benedict, for that matter, required them to read throughout Lent. One monk would read out loud in the refectory while his companions dined (as is still the case today); sometimes he might finish reading a text that had not been completed in church. The lives of the saints enjoyed a privileged status, as did books of commentaries. Manuscripts thus played a major role in the life of religious communities.

CHARTERS

Custom has established a distinction within medieval sources between manuscripts (by which is meant books) and "diplomas" or charters, a generic term used to cover individual, practical texts such as deeds, endowments, confirmations, judgments, agreements, and other documents issued by lords, bishops, abbots or other generous donors. These charters were drafted in tens of thousands all across Europe, their number notably increasing from the twelfth century onward. Their distribution is highly variable.

Fig. 12. Vernacular French increasingly found its way into manuscripts in the thirteenth century. The careful hand makes it easy to read. *Conseil de guerre de Pierre de Fontaine*. Nouv. Acq. franç. 10685, fol. 73, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



Fig. 13. The upper board of the binding of the *Drogon Sacramentary*, 850–855. Ivory and silver. Ms. Lat. 9428, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

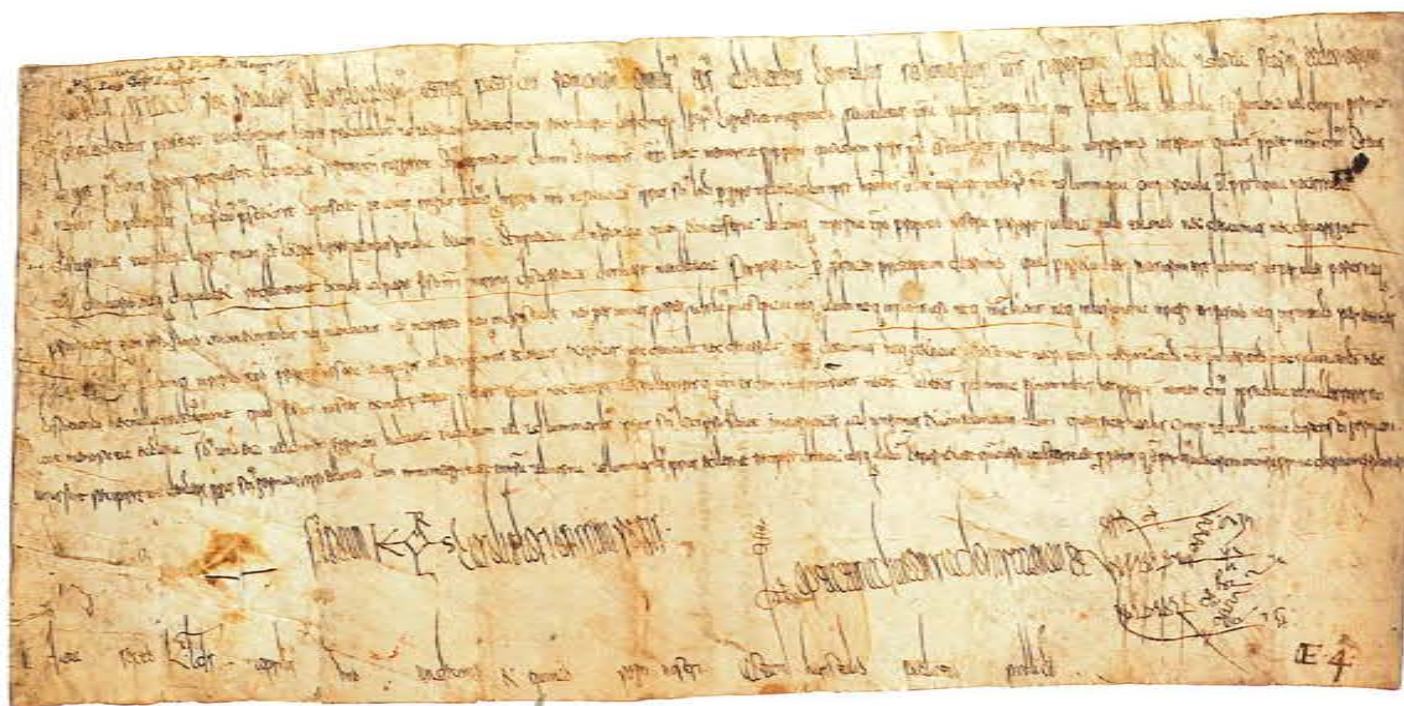


Fig. 14. A charter issued by Charlemagne to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 779. In the eighth century, the hand used for charters was difficult to read, yet it was retained to lend great solemnity to this type of document (note the vertical extension of letters). K7, no. 2r, Musée de l'Histoire de France, Paris.

In medieval days, it was usual for archivists in churches, monasteries, and chapter-houses to store separately documents that recorded their most important privileges, the most glamorous being royal charters and papal bulls. These documents were drawn up in the royal or papal chancery, or else in the monastic workshop when the beneficiary enjoyed the possibility of preparing the document that would then be transmitted for validation. The realm of charters is as varied and dense as that of books, and there can be no question of dealing with it in detail here. I would just like to make a few remarks.

The first concerns the script, or hand, that has been called charter hand (or diploma hand) as opposed to book hand. This distinction arose at the very time that the Carolingian minuscule was developing. Whereas capitularies, annals, and treaties were written in clear, discrete minuscule letters, charters issued by Charlemagne's chancery continued to employ a presentation and script similar to Merovingian diplomas (Fig. 14). A large parchment would be used, and the text would run horizontally across the longest side. The first line would be composed of very tall, thin, tightly spaced letters that were difficult to read. The next line, separated by a wide space, featured fine, often contorted letters with elongated ascenders and

descenders. This charter hand lacked the simplified, round form of book hand.

The persistence of this tradition may seem surprising, but the truth is that the use of charters was quite different from that of books and other texts intended for wide dissemination. People probably wanted to retain a somewhat mysterious—and certainly solemn—air to documents issued by the king, a solemnity further stressed by chancery marks and monograms, not to mention the all-important seal. Even when the hand employed for royal charters slowly began to approximate the one used for books, nothing was changed in terms of external presentation, which functioned as a guarantee of authenticity. A real break only occurred with the Capetian dynasty, whose charters were more like ordinary texts, while nevertheless retaining a few features of other charters.

These documents, stored with infinite care in a chest after having been folded to protect the text, provided the crucial proof of the rights and possessions of the church that held them. As a precautionary measure, they were sometimes copied onto another support, and these duplicates might be gathered into a collection of charters known as a cartulary, making them easier to consult with other documents on the same subject without having to remove

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the originals from their store. If necessary, the original parchment would be displayed to an assembly and read out loud (texts were sometimes composed in rhymed prose). In case of doubt it would be examined by specialists, when it would be compared with other documents and its seal and symbolic signs would be scrutinized. The more handsome the document, the more sure its impact: noteworthy was a text well arranged across its surface, enhanced by a first line of tall letters, with capitals beginning each sentence or highlighting certain names (especially those of patron saints), adorned with decorative loops and arabesques, endowed with a royal monogram, imperial notary's symbol (say, a beehive), or papal *Rota*, accompanied by a list of witnesses (in lines or columns), with the date perhaps transferred to the terminal position, and with an affixed or dangling seal (Fig. 15). Like churches, towns soon became attached to their "charters" and "privileges," especially charters of freedom or franchise. A more common procedure was adopted for ordinary diplomas, simple notices and announcements hastily drafted on a piece of parchment and sometimes awkwardly cut.

The papal chancery issued bulls drafted according to similar principles. Pope Leo IX, who was familiar with the Germanic court, established more precise rules for bulls (Fig. 10). Many bishops, who had charters and bulls in their church archives, copied them in turn, drawing up particularly magnificent documents, many examples of which survive from the ninth century onward, notably in the region between the Loire and Rhine rivers. Other, lesser, criteria were adopted in southern administrative lands; beyond the Rhine the practice of fine charters lagged somewhat behind.

Studies of the paleography and diplomatics of the various royal, imperial, papal, and episcopal chanceries of the central Middle Ages have made a major contribution to our knowledge of the institutions, practices, and attitudes of the period, drawing special attention to the titles borne by issuers, to preambles, to the lists and arrangements of witnesses, to types of seals, and to the formal wordings of curses ("If any man oppose this gift, he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and will burn in hell with Dathan and Abiram and Judas the traitor"). Charters have become historical documents that specialists continue to study in order to come up with new finds. I will refer to one example, the so-called Liège hand, to illustrate the interest of such research.

ADORNING CHARTER HAND

A German scholar was the first to be struck by the original adornment of charters issued in the Belgian town of Liège in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He noted in particular



Fig. 15. A joint document issued by the bishops of Paris, Soissons, and Auxerre, relating to a dispute between Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Saint-Victor (1144-1151). A charter was only valid if it had an official seal; here only one of three remain. L. 900, no. 16, Archives Nationales, Paris.

the many loops that scribes added to the ends of the strokes of the letters *s* and *l*, by extending tracery back toward the left (Fig. 16). It was not a question of drawing attention to certain words but merely of decorating the spaces between the lines. At the same time, tildes and other marks of abbreviation assumed unusual scope. Jacques Stiennon then re-examined this issue in the desire to discover whether there existed a "province of the Liège hand." After selecting three criteria—the serpentine swirl of loops, the special spring-like shape of the letter *g*, and the elegant lengthening of the abbreviation for *us*, he began combing archives throughout Europe and learned that this decorative approach was in fact widespread and not



Fig. 16. Details of a charter issued by Thierry, duc de Lorraine, to the chapter of Saint-Dié in 1114. The scribe was a remarkable calligrapher, displaying great confidence and elegant pen-strokes. Note, in particular, the gratuitous series of loops above *canonicus*, as well as the original handling of the *g* (in *rogatu*). G. 248, Archives Départementales des Vosges.

therefore specific to Liège. To a certain extent, he agreed with Hajnal's conclusions on the unity of script across European schools. Yet it is possible to draw further conclusions from Stiennon's study—it revealed not only the influence of the papal chancery on episcopal chanceries in terms of layout and decoration but also the apparent unity of script in Cistercian monastic workshops. The same observations always recur: realms of similar hands existed, charters were solemnized, chanceries mutually influenced one another. As far as what we still call, for the sake of convenience, the decorative Liège hand, its exceptional exuberance clearly reached a region vaster than the province of Liège alone, one that harks back to the former kingdom of Austrasia; this means that the features studied by Stiennon were most common and most spectacular within the area from Soissons to Cologne, from Utrecht to Toul, in Lotharingia (roughly equivalent to the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Lorraine, Alsace, and northwest Germany), and east of Champagne. So the idea of a larger "province" of writing is not totally null and void.

A final point worth examining concerns certain notable changes in the eleventh century, when writing suddenly took on greater importance. After roughly 1050, the number of charters grew steadily, generated initially by the bishops, followed in the next century by secular authorities, and finally by all kinds of other people. Special attention has been brought to bear on the archives of monasteries caught in the battle of investitures and the implementation of feudal structures, a period when solid, ample archives were required to consolidate estate claims. That was when old privileges, becoming illegible, were recopied, when cartularies and briefs were compiled, when certain documents were grouped into dossiers, when claimants went regularly to Rome to obtain sweeping confirmations of property, or to recover or obtain new churches unjustly controlled by laymen. As people began writing more, charters evolved: lists of witnesses lengthened, documents were increasingly adorned with a seal or ornate lettering, the use of abbreviations suddenly expanded, and other minor practices emerged (see above). Overall, a rather sudden transformation occurred



Fig. 17. Detail of a cartulary from the commandery at Éterpigny, 1285.

This scribe writes in an equally confident hand, but instead of tracing letters one by one he links them all, accentuating the tall, bold strokes. This is cursive script. Nouv. Acq. lat. 927, fol. 1, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

around 1060–1080 that paved the way for a twelfth century rich in charters, preserved in the collections of the new religious orders (Cistercian, Premonstratensian, and other canons regular) as well as chapter-houses, military orders, and traditional Benedictines. Each order constituted, or reconstituted, archives that are now priceless sources of information for historians. Manuscripts did not undergo a similar change at this time, but continued on their already steady path. In the realm of books, the main new arrival was the cartulary, a collection of copies of original charters to be preserved; such books established a bridge between charters and manuscripts.

THIRTEENTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

It is obviously presumptuous to attempt to cover the evolution of texts and writing in the West by following only the broad lines, given that there were so many nuances and variations in application. This description of thirteenth-century developments is therefore subject to caution. The most striking novelty was nevertheless the growing use of vernacular languages. In France, of course, by the late eleventh century the type of epic poem known as the *chanson de geste* was composed in the local language, which began to make its way into manuscripts, something that

had occurred much earlier in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic worlds. When it came to charters, the vernacular arrived later—it began in the second half of the thirteenth century, taking another half century to reach German lands; a different time-scale operated for Italian, Occitan, and Spanish.

A second novelty concerned the shape of letters. Rounded forms dominated until the middle of the twelfth century, when curves broke into angles. Making a connection with the pointed arches of Gothic architecture which were simultaneously replacing round, Romanesque arches, specialists labeled the new script “Gothic.” J. Boussard has shown that it may have originated in a way of cutting the quill’s writing edge obliquely (as seen in old metal nibs), which made it easier to broaden some strokes and to narrow others, transforming a round letter *o* into a square one, for example. Not everyone is convinced by this explanation; indeed, thin and thick strokes already existed and, furthermore, this new pen would not have permitted the next stage, that of cursive script (Fig. 17). Twelfth-century letters were tightly spaced, and the base of one anticipated the beginning of the next. Soon the pen was no longer lifted, and the link from one letter to another was made. Equally soon, the liberated hand began to flow from one letter to another without stopping at all, extending with a slight stroke the stems and tails that sloped more and more.

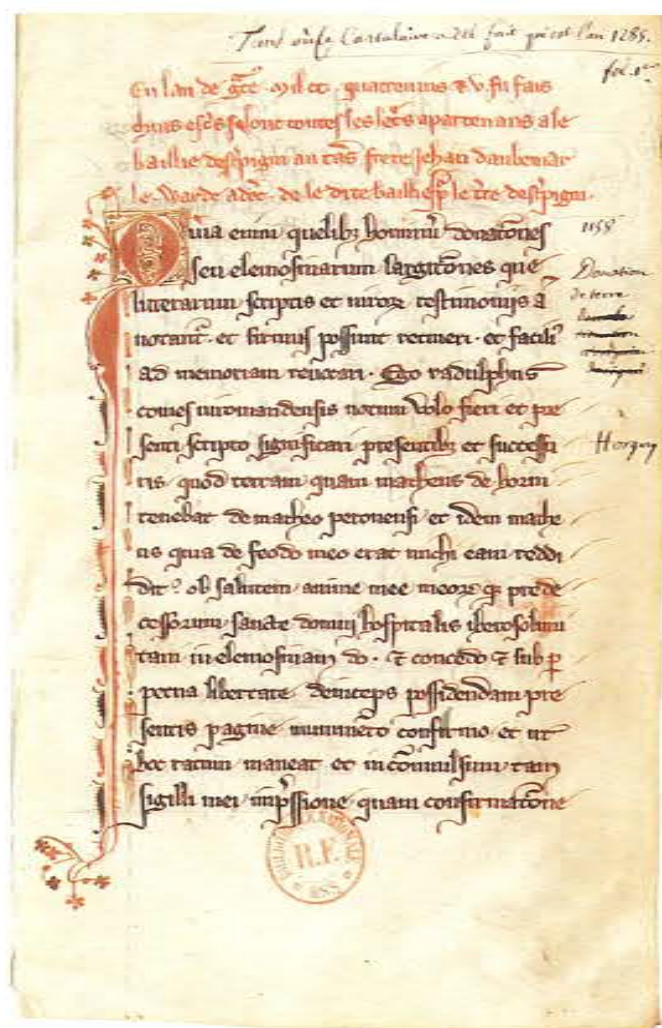


Fig. 18. The detail of a manuscript from the Abbey of Marchiennes, 1305, displays the same features as the charter in Fig. 17, here applied to a book hand. Note the concern for a legible layout, as well as the refined capital. Nouv. Acq. fr. 21287, pièce 12, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Hence the fine, rounded letters of Carolingian minuscule became more pointed and slanting. Many scribes remained attentive to traditional practices, but circumstances no longer favored a slow, steady pace.

Just then the difference between charter and book re-emerged (Fig. 18). Charters became smaller in format, placed more text on a given surface, tightened spacing, abbreviated words, and eliminated any text judged pointless (for example, preambles and lists of witnesses). Lay people, municipalities, and princes established archives in turn, opening registers, account books, and cartularies—all books that constituted, as mentioned above, a new category halfway between charters and manuscripts.

The spread of schools, the founding of universities, the increase in the number of students, and the need to distribute books in greater numbers all put pressure on the traditional practices of monastic scriptoria where time mattered little. Workshops were established to facilitate the dissemination of basic texts and invented an assembly-line method of working: the book to be copied was unbound and assigned quire by quire to various scribes, each of whom, working on his own, reproduced the model by carefully respecting text, spacing, and layout. The copied quires were then taken to the binder and assembled for a buyer. Thus arose the systems of *pecia*, or piece-work, without which universities would have suffered a drastic lack of books.

Parchment continued to be consumed in vast quantity, and the major monastic suppliers were joined by parchment sellers in the university towns of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford. Finally, paper arrived in Spain from the East via the Muslims, but only slowly made its way into Western chanceries—it was not yet considered sturdy enough for items designed to last. The day of paper's rise was not far off, however.

THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE BIRTH OF PRINTING

The eleventh century had witnessed changes of detail in scripts and saw the emergence of copies, briefs, seals, and systematic archiving. The following period was one of increased religious activity, with the birth of new orders eager for charters and confirmation of privileges, even as towns also began multiplying. The slow transformation of chapter schools into communities of students and masters—that is, universities—plus the increasing control wrested by town burghers over municipalities and urban society, and the consolidation of secular and ecclesiastical territorial power, all created the conditions for a sharp rise in writing and books.

The steep increase in the number of charters has already been mentioned. The few authorities entitled to validate such documents were joined or represented by officials, notaries public, and sworn clerks. Scribes were everywhere: in castles, in provincial headquarters, in mayoral offices, in monasteries, in priories. The widespread custom of keeping accounts and opening registers soon favored, for economic reasons, the greater use of paper in order to save parchment for rarer items (continuing to use skins as the main writing surface would have led to the massacre of herds of livestock).

Books were required for teaching, for reading, and for collecting by patrons—ever more books. Churches brought

their old books up to date and revamped liturgical texts by having them redecorated in the reigning fashion. Burghers wanted to have their own little libraries composed of prose novels, verse romances, books of hours, histories, and chronicles. Gone were the days of clerical and monastic exclusiveness as libraries spread and grew (their swelling catalogs now provide information on their varied content). Art patronage became common; although not every example can be mentioned here, one man's name has gone down in history in this respect—Jean, duc de Berry (died 1416), whose illuminated books simultaneously represented a form of wealth and a sign of cultivation (Fig. 19). Exhibitions in recent decades have amply shown the splendor of German, Italian, and Spanish manuscripts, prefiguring the imperceptible shift from painting on parchment to painting on wood, then canvas. A given artist could change from one medium to another. This movement affected all of Europe, which was busy reading and writing. Everything that museums now display to represent the late Middle Ages—triptychs, painted panels from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, frescoes—tends to foreground books, for instance an open book on a stand before the Virgin when visited by the archangel Gabriel, or a volume placed in the hands of a donor.

Handwriting assumed hundreds of forms. The trunk represented by the Carolingian minuscule blossomed into a thousands fronds and leaves like a palm tree or papyrus. On the one hand, the old script survived, barely modified—sometimes rigidified—as its strokes thickened. It sought refuge in luxury manuscripts, in the huge graduals and antiphonaries set on high stands amid the monks' choir stalls, or else it closed ranks in the columns of breviaries and, above all, chronicles. On the other hand, the emergence of cursive script opened the way to every invention; handwriting altered as a function of the dynamics of the pen, becoming smaller (sometimes tiny), formed of short lines and curves that made the original letters hard to recognize. One need merely look at the "unintelligible" marginal notes of Thomas Aquinas, or the scribbles of notaries, or an inventory compiled in some clerk's clumsy hand, or a hasty missive scrawled on a scrap of paper. And this occurred in every language, Latin sometimes remaining calligraphy's last refuge.

The subsequent reaction of humanist scholars is therefore hardly surprising: how could they revive pure



Fig. 19. Shortly before printed books arrived on the scene, the art of scribes and illuminators reached its zenith, as seen in the *Grandes Heures du duc de Berry*, completed in 1409. Here priority went to color and decoration. Books had become an item of luxury rather than work. Ms. lat. 919, fol. 96, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

grammar, correct phrasing, and faultless speech if the handwriting itself was deficient? The problem harked back to Carolingian policies. Indeed, the revival of Latin and ancient authors led scholars back to the manuscripts of the ninth and tenth centuries, back to Carolingian script. There thus occurred a renaissance not of Roman books, but of Carolingian books. Humanistic script was one of round, separately written letters; it led to the idea of carving each letter in wood, in order to reproduce it endlessly. Printing was born.