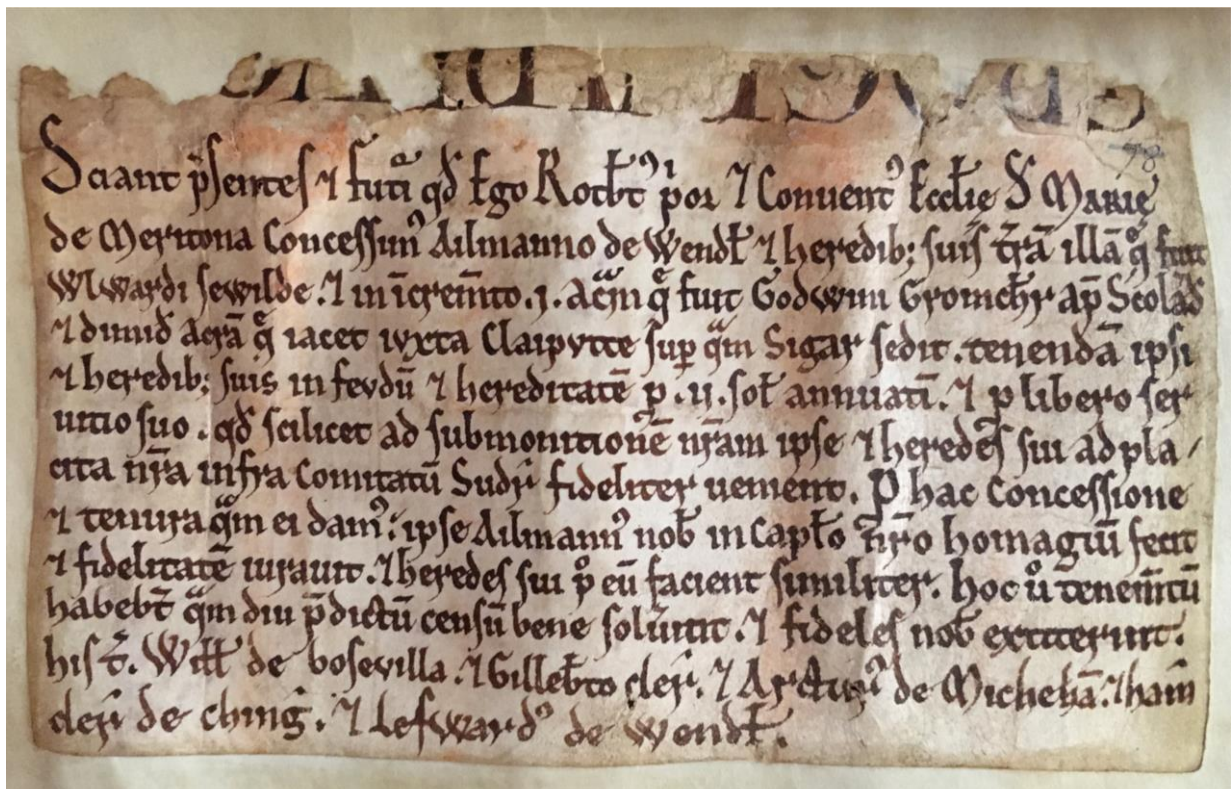


Exercise 5: Transcription

MERTON PRIORY CHIROGRAPH



Provenance, Materials, and Appearance

The document is part of a chirograph taken from the Merton Priory Cartulary, contained within a post-dissolution collection of miscellaneous documents currently held by the British Library.¹ A chirograph is a medieval legal agreement that is written in duplicate or triplicate before cutting into separate parts and given to different parties; the idea being that the document can be physically reassembled if dispute over the subject arises.

The age of the document is somewhat difficult to ascertain, as it is one of many undated documents contained within the cartulary. Heales proposes that the document dates to the time of the third Robert the Prior, which spanned from 1177 – 1186, but states also that it is difficult to be more specific than that because of a lack of other identifiers.²

The material used for the manuscript is vellum and the volume measures approximately 19.5cm by 14cm.³ The earliest part of the manuscript is missing and the first document listed is numbered xxxix (39) and continues thus, which affects the folio numbers. Although this is folio 80, it is referred to also as Cart. No. 46, fol. lxxxj. The ink used for the script is black with a faint reddish-brown note and is likely to be iron gall ink, commonly used during the middle ages and beyond.⁴ There is no decoration on the page, however there remains evidence of a title in capitalised letters at the top of the page which has been badly damaged and can no longer be read. It is possible that the word once read “*CHIROGRAPHUM*” or similar, as it is possible to discern what appears to be U and M at the end of the first word. Amongst the damage there is a straight cut line which potentially indicates the division of the original document into two parts,

¹ British Library Cotton MS Cleopatra C VII, f. cvi (recto). Unfortunately, due to the on-going cyber incident at the British Library, this document is not available to view in full and therefore I must rely on description of the physicality of the manuscript (other than this single chirograph section) as described by others.

² Alfred Heales and Mill Stephenson, *The Records of Merton Priory in the County of Surrey* (London, H. Frowde, 1898) <<http://archive.org/details/recordsofmertonp00heal>> [accessed 7 January 2025].

³ Heales and Stephenson, *The Records of Merton Priory in the County of Surrey*.

⁴ ‘The Gall of It!’, *Archives and Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library*, 2023 <<https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/archivesandmanuscripts/2023/05/15/the-gall-of-it/>> [accessed 7 January 2025].

indicating it is likely to have been cut down the middle of the title word to form the two halves in a straight division known as “polled” cut.⁵ This same practice can be seen in numerous chirographs from the era and beyond.⁶

Despite the damage to the top of the page, the rest the document is in fair condition with the exception of some weathering on the right-hand side, grubbiness at the base of the page, a small puncture hole above the penultimate line of text, and some reddish-orange staining running down the page (though this does not obscure the text). The staining is unlikely to be oxidation of the iron gall ink (which may produce somewhat similar coloured stains) because of the uniform pattern of the staining; the general state of the document does not correlate with iron oxidation either. It is possible instead that these marks are the result of reagents used from the 18th century onwards, applied to documents to make them more legible.⁷ Reagents used were varied and included gallic acid, potassium bisulphate, and ammonium dihydrogen phosphate.⁸ The issue with the use of such reagents is that they typically only worked for their intended purpose in the short term, and over time have the potential to severely damage or even destroy the text they were intended to highlight. The straight pattern of the marks on this chirograph may indicate brush strokes that applied a reagent, if not applied to this folio directly then perhaps to a folio or two before it.

Script and Handwriting Analysis

The script is likely proto-gothic.⁹ This was a transitional script that bridged the gap between Carolingian minuscule, commonly used from around the 8th century to around the start of the

⁵ “Polled” cuts were straight cut; “indented” cuts were jagged. Both styles were used.

⁶ ‘Chirographs, Indentures and Final Concords’, 2016

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20160309120542/http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/word/chirograph2.htm>> [accessed 9 January 2025].

⁷ Raymond Clemens, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2007)

<http://archive.org/details/introductiontoma0000clem_g8i8> [accessed 10 January 2025].

⁸ Clemens, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*.

⁹ Various called “early Gothic” and, rarely, “late Carolingian” amongst other more obscure terms.

13th century (in England), albeit sparsely used towards the end of the period; and Gothic script, which started to emerge (in England) in the mid-12th century before becoming the standard popular script in the 13th century.¹⁰ The use of proto-gothic script would fit with the proposed date range of the document, and its use was especially prevalent in Anglo-Norman areas and the Low Countries which had previously adopted Carolingian Minuscule as their standard script.¹¹

The proto-gothic script is identifiable by several features, evident in the chirograph. The letters are somewhat curved, with evidence of sharp “flicks” on the minims. These “flicks” would become more pronounced in later Gothic script, and curves in letters would make way for a more rigid, upright look. However, the text in this script is not as curved as Carolingian minuscule, defining it as a transitional script. It has a more compressed appearance than Carolingian minuscule, but still is not as compressed as Gothic would later become. The presence of several closed or semi-closed lower-case letter G in the text (figure 1) was a feature of proto-gothic script, as well as the presence of tall S and short S letters (figures 2 and 3).¹²



Figure 1: A closed lower-case letter G, characteristic of proto-gothic script (line 8).

¹⁰ ‘Gothic Variations’ <<https://medievalwritings.atilto.com.au/scripts/history6.htm>> [accessed 9 January 2025].

¹¹ Michelle Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts : From Antiquity to 1600* (London : British Library, 1990) <<http://archive.org/details/guidetowesternhi0000brow>> [accessed 9 January 2025].

¹² ‘Early Gothic: Letter Forms and Aspect’ <<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/yorkdoom/palweb/week11/palwk11c.htm#forms>> [accessed 9 January 2025].



Figure 2: A single word which exhibits both the tall and short S letters (line 5).

The script does, however, show inconsistencies. For example, the name “*Sigar*” on line 4 is written with what appears to be simply a larger form of the short letter S, whereas it would be expected to have the short letter S only at the end of the word, and the long letter S at the start of the word. The same inconsistency is present in the word “*Sudri*” on line 7. We also have a large letter S at the end of the word “*fideles*” on line 10. It is perhaps noteworthy that the short letter S is used at the start of two proper nouns (*Sigar*, *Sudri*). There is considerable variation between scribes as to how they write the script, and it is possible that some of the inconsistencies are either mistakes or are part of a regional variant to the script.

Punctuation in the script includes the punctus, which acts as a sort of comma – but it also used to highlight numbers in this script, and the punctus elevatus, an early form of the semi-colon.

Transcription

1. Sciant p[re]sentes et fut[ur]i q[uo]d ego Ro[dber]t[us] p[ri]o[rum] and convent[us] Ecclie
S[ancti] Marie
2. de Meritona concessim[us] Ailmanno de Wendl[us] et heredib[us]; sui[?]s t[e]rra[e]
illa[?] q[uo] fuit
3. Wilwardi Sewilde • et in i[n]crem[e]nto • 1 • ac[ua] in q[uem] fuit Godwini Gromch[e]r apud
S’[?]cola[n]d
4. et dimid[ium] ac[ra]m q[ue] iacet iuxta claiputte sup[er] q[ua]m Sigar sedit •
tenenda[m] ipsi

5. et heredib[us]; suis in feudu[m] et hereditate[m] p[ro] .2. sol[idus] annuati[m] . et p[ro] libero ser-
6. -vitio suo . q[uo]d scilicet ad submonition[em] nr[?]am ispe et heredes sui ad pla-
7. -cita nr[?]a infra comitatu[m] Sudri fideliter vemento . P[ro] hac concessione
8. et tenura q[ua]m ei dam[us]; ipse Ailmann[us] nob[is] incapto nr[?]o homagiu[m] fecit
9. et fidelitatem iuravit. Et heredes sui p(ro) eum facient similiter. Hoc uo tenementum
10. habebt[um] q[ua]m diu p[o]dictu[m] censu[m] bene solu[m]itit . Et fideles nob[is] extiterurt,
11. hi s[un]t testes] . Will[iam?] de Bosevilla . et Gilb[er]to Cler[c] . et Arturi de Michelh[am] . and Ham[on]
12. Cler[c] de Ching[fort/d] . et Lesward[us] de Wendl[us] .

The document appears to detail a land transfer between Robert (the Prior of Merton Priory) and Ailmanno de Wendlus and his heirs, following the (presumed) deaths of the previous landowners. In return for this, Ailmanno de Wendlus is expected to pay an annual rent and agrees to provide service to the priory. The chirograph ends with a list of witnesses to the agreement.

Methodology and Analysis of Transcription

In order to transcribe this document, I first read through it to see if I could determine any words without further assistance. I noted whilst doing this that the document was heavily abbreviated and that I was not immediately able to work out exactly what was written in most circumstances. Once I had worked through the entire text, I wrote it down and filled in the

abbreviations I could. I then used various resources to determine the abbreviations I could not work out, the most notable of which was Capelli Online.¹³

There were several incidences where I did not understand how to work out the abbreviation (see figure 2 below for example) because the answer that seemed obvious (using the superscript letter to fill in the word) did not seem to make sense. In this case, “qwm/gwm” is not a real word, and the letter W would not be written in such a way (as demonstrated elsewhere in the document where it is presented as two cross-linked Vs). I managed to find indication in Clemens’ *“Introduction to Manuscript Studies”* that this W shape represents “u”, “ua”, or “u” and “m” together. It was then that I realised the first letter of this word was not an unconventionally-written lower case “g”, but was a lower case “q” with a leftwards flick on the descending tail, meaning these words were likely to be “qua”, “quam”, and other variants.



Figure 2: Initially unidentified abbreviation which appears several times in the text.

I applied this method to other abbreviations to begin with, and began to notice repeated use as I progressed through the document. The use of a flicked line above a letter (called a “tilde”, although with the flicks it is more akin to the early Cyrillic diacritic “titlo”), often a vowel at the apparent end of word, indicates a missing N or M (figure 3) – although not always, as demonstrated in the use of the word “ap” on line 3 where the diacritic likely indicates the word “apud”. It is perhaps notable that the tilde is placed above a consonant in that example, as opposed to a vowel in the figures below.

¹³ ‘Ad Fontes: Resources / Abbreviations / Cappelli Online’
<<https://www.adfontes.uzh.ch/en/ressourcen/abkuerzungen/cappelli-online>> [accessed 10 January 2025].



Figure 3: Two examples of the use of titlo-like tildes above the ends of the written word to indicate an N or M to complete the word (both from line 4)

I noted also frequent use of the “7” symbol, representing the Latin word “et” (and). This is a symbol taken from a shorthand format called Tironian notes, said to be created by Marus Tullius Tiro in 4 BCE. Tironian notes were developed further during the Carolingian dynasty and were sometimes seen mixed with Carolingian miniscule script.¹⁴ Although the use of Tironian notes fell out of favour as time went on, it is thought that John of Tilbury (one of Thomas Becket’s scholars) created a text in the 1170s detailing a system of abbreviations based on Tironian notes, which correlates well with this chirograph and it is possible it was in a revival at the time of writing, although this theory is of authorship is not without contention.¹⁵ However, the symbol was commonly used in Old English (along with the ampersand) to mean the same thing, and could feasibly be a vestigial hangover from Old English into Middle English, applied here to a Latin document by the Anglo-Norman monks.¹⁶

Some of the abbreviations I was unable to ascertain the meaning of and had to guess, partly using the translation provided by Heales. For example, in line 12 the first word is written as “Cler”, with a diacritic mark above the R. I was unable to work out what this could mean, but

¹⁴ ‘Note-Worthy Connections: Antique Shorthand in Carolingian Books’
<<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2019/08/note-worthy-connections-antique-shorthand-in-carolingian-books.html>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

¹⁵ John Haines, ‘Did John of Tilbury Write an Ars Notaria?’, 2008, doi:10.3406/scrip.2008.3985.

¹⁶ Elly van Gelderen, *A History of the English Language: Revised Edition* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014).

Heales has this as “clerk”, which seems to fit (albeit with the correct Latin spelling convention). Similarly, two words later, the word “*Ching*” with a diacritic above the G is present. Heales has this word translated to “Aring”, which I disagree with – and I believe this is an abbreviation for Chingford, which is 25 miles from Merton and was first mentioned in the Domesday book almost 100 years earlier.

At the end of line 3, the word “*S’cola’d*” is present, and appears to be the name of a place. I was unable elaborate further on this abbreviation. It is possible the S’ stands for Sanctus, but earlier use of this abbreviation in the document is not the same. I used Google maps and checked the Domesday Book database to determine a place name that would fit this abbreviation but was unable to find anything. There are several places listed on the Survey of English Place-Names which begin with “Sco” and end with “land” but none seem to fit the local area or timeframe.¹⁷

I had problems deciphering some of the handwriting, aside from the abbreviations. The compressed nature of the script, although not as compressed as gothic would later become, did make me question what several words could be. The first word, “*Sciant*”, for example looks like “Saant” at first glance because of the compression of the C and I in positions 2 and 3. It was not until I compared the actual “a” in the word that I realised it looked different to the first two letters, and learning of the phrase “*sciant presentes et futuri*” that I was able to work out the correct word, leading to the phrase.

This was a challenging exercise, and whilst I am not confident about the accuracy of my transcription, I started off barely being able to read any of the document and now have a degree of fluency which has come from study and will be extremely useful in transcription and translation activities in the future.

¹⁷ ‘Survey of English Place-Names’
<<https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/search/p/%28placeName%3A%2Asco%2A%29?start=140>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

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