

HPHI7016

Past Peoples, Present Societies:

Research Methods and Skills

Assignment 5

Transcription Exercise

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Commentary

The document to be transcribed is a chirograph which forms part of the Merton Priory Cartulary which is held by the British Library. The cartulary contains documents dating from 1150 to 1470, amongst which are two pasted chirographs, including the one in question.¹ A chirograph is a legal document, possibly originating in Anglo-Saxon England, containing an agreement between two or more parties. The text was written as many times as there were parties to the agreement on the same piece of parchment, each copy separated by a pattern or a word written in large capital letters, such as CIROGRAPHUM or INDENTURA. The parchment was then cut with a wavy line which passed through the word or pattern. Each party to the agreement kept a section of the document, whose validity could then be proven by putting the pieces together.² It is not possible to see from the image of the Merton Priory chirograph if it has been cut through in this manner, although it is clear that something has been written in large capitals above the main area of the text and the top edge of the parchment appears to be jagged.

The Merton Priory chirograph cannot be dated exactly, but Heales argues that it must have been created between 1177 and 1186 during the time when the third Prior Robert was at Merton Priory.³ This conforms to the dating in the British Library catalogue entry for the Cartulary, with the earliest possible date being 1150.⁴ The script used is an English cursive documentary form, which developed as part of the Gothic script tradition in Northern Europe from the twelfth century, with a Protogothic semicursive script being used in the royal chancery of England in this period and then spreading more widely throughout England. This can be seen in the chirograph's scribe's use of linked letters and loops, which increased the speed at which documents could be produced and copied.⁵ The text also shows an example

¹ British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C VII, ff. 60–204.

² Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 226.

³ Alfred Heales, *The Records of Merton Priory in the County of Surrey: Chiefly from Early and Unpublished Documents* (London: Henry Frowde, 1898), p. 28.

⁴ British Library, 'Archives and Manuscripts Catalogue', [n.d.] <[Cotton MS Cleopatra C VII, ff 60–204 - British Library Archives and Manuscripts Catalogue](#)> [accessed 31 December 2025].

⁵ Michelle P. Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600* (London: British Library, 1990), p. 92.

of biting, where two letters are touching, in the first word where the c and the i of Sciant are joined together.⁶

The transcription was produced from a digital image of the chirograph, which limits the analysis which can be carried of the materials used and the methods of production. The manuscript appears to be intact apart from the damage to the top edge noted above. It appears that, at a later stage, the number 78 has been written above the main body of the text on the right-hand side, and this may have been subsequently crossed through. The text appears to be in the hand of one scribe as the letters and symbols are consistent throughout. The ink used for the last two words appears slightly fainter than the rest of the text but the significance of this cannot be assessed from the digital image.

The transcription was carried out in several stages. Firstly, the text was scanned for letters and words which could be more easily identified and transcribed. Some issues were encountered during this stage when words contain several letters with minims (single short vertical strokes), such as m, n, i and u as it can be difficult to separate and distinguish the individual letters.⁷ Secondly, the abbreviations were identified and decoded. This was the most challenging and time-consuming stage as a non-Latin reader, as it was frequently unclear which ending would be grammatically correct for nouns and verbs in context. When a rough transcription had been achieved, an online Latin dictionary was used to check the validity of any words which were unclear and significant changes were made to the transcription at this stage.⁸ When the text had been fully transcribed, online translation software was used to produce the gist of an English translation in order to verify if the transcription was clear enough to produce a coherent text in English. Finally, this English translation was compared to the one produced by Heales to check for similarities and differences. There were significant differences between the two, which seemed to arise from differences of transcription, particularly of the names of people and places but the main meaning of the two texts was similar.⁹ The transcription in this assignment was not changed following the comparison with Heales. Apart from

⁶ Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, p.154.

⁷ Ibid. p. 154.

⁸ Whitakers Words Online, [n.d.] <[Whitaker's WORDS Online](#)> [accessed 31 December 2025].

⁹ Heales, *Records of Merton Priory*, p.28.

deciphering the letters, the decisions involved in the transcription were mainly associated with abbreviations and punctuation. Examples of these will now be discussed.

The text of the Merton Priory chirograph includes many abbreviations which were commonly used by Medieval scribes both to increase the speed of document production and to save space when using expensive materials such as parchment or velum. Abbreviations were more common in legal and academic texts than in those produced to be read aloud. Clemens and Graham identify three broad groups of abbreviations: suspensions, where the final part of the word is omitted; contractions, where the first and last letters are written but the middle of the word is omitted; and symbols, such as that used in the chirograph to represent the Latin word 'et'. This last group developed from a Roman system of shorthand.¹⁰

In contrast, Cappelli uses six categories of abbreviation: truncation; contraction; abbreviation marks which are significant in themselves; abbreviation marks which are significant in context; superscript letters; and conventional signs.¹¹ There is some overlap between the categories, and some abbreviations could be included in several of them. However, each of these categories is present in the Merton Priory chirograph and Cappelli's categorisation will be used as a framework to analyse the use of abbreviations in the text and the issues that they presented when attempting to transcribe it. The usefulness of this approach will then be briefly assessed. Examples of each type of abbreviation will be highlighted but not all occurrences will be discussed due to the constraints of the assignment.

Abbreviation by truncation occurs when the scribe omits a letter or letters at the end of a word. Cappelli highlights two types of symbol that are used to indicate this type of abbreviation. Firstly, there are general signs which do not specifically indicate truncation as they are also used for other types of abbreviation. These are written above the text and consist of short straight or curved lines.¹² An example of this can be seen in the chirograph in line 5, where a line above the final letter in 'fevdu' indicates a truncation. In this case, the letter 'm' has been added in the transcription

¹⁰ Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, pp. 89-93.

¹¹ Adriano Cappelli, *The Elements of Abbreviation in Medieval Latin Paleography*, trans. by David Heimann and Richard Kay (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Libraries, 1982), p.1.

¹² Cappelli, *Elements of Abbreviation*, p. 1.

which is a common form of expansion when this type of sign is used with a final letter 'u'.¹³

The second type of truncation which Cappelli describes involves signs which are only used to indicate that letters are missing at the end of the word. These include the period (.) and a number of diagonal signs which cut through the last letter of the abbreviated word or a form of tail which is added to the last letter.¹⁴ On the second line of the chirograph, a cross stroke is added to the final l in 'Wendl' indicating that some additional letters should be added. As this is a placename, I have not been able to full resolve what this should be. Heales interprets this as 'Wandlesw' (modern day Wandsworth)' which is likely given the geographical position of Merton Priory but there was not sufficient evidence from the text or the sources on abbreviations to verify this.¹⁵

Words are abbreviated by contraction when the beginning and end of the word is present but a letter or letters are omitted from the middle of the word. The same general signs that are used to indicate truncation are also used for contraction and, similarly, there are some standard contractions which scribes commonly used.¹⁶ An example of this can be seen in the second word of the transcription, where a line above the initial p in 'psentes' indicates that 're' should be inserted, resulting in the word 'presentes'.

Cappelli next describes 'abbreviation marks significant in themselves'. There are seven subcategories, each of which represent a specific missing letter or group of letters.¹⁷ Again, there is some overlap with the categories already described. The symbol above the 'u' in 'solutit' in line 10 of the transcription can be considered to belong to this category and this sign often indicates the omission of the letter 'r' or a group of letters containing r.

Cappelli's fourth category concerns abbreviation marks significant in context in that they vary in relation to the letter they are next to. Some symbols which have been included in previous categories are also described here, including the period and the

¹³ Cappelli, *Elements of Abbreviation*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 2.

¹⁵ Heales, *Records of Merton Priory*, p.28.

¹⁶ Cappelli, *Elements of Abbreviation*, pp. 7-13.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp-13-18.

short straight line. Several of these signs appear in the chirograph. In line 2, the semi colon following the word 'heredib;' represents 'us' when following a letter 'b' and on line 3 the periods on either side of the letter 'i' (.i.) are transcribed as the phrase 'id est'.¹⁸

The fifth category of abbreviation involves the use of superscript letters to indicate what has been omitted. All the vowels and a small number of consonants are used in this way, and normally indicate that this letter, on its own or in a standard combination with other letters, has been omitted.¹⁹ This is used several times in the chirograph, for example in lines 3 and 4, with a superscript 'e' over the letter 'q' to indicate 'que'.

Cappelli's final group concerns the use of conventional signs which stand alone and can be substituted for a commonly used word.²⁰ In the chirograph, the symbol for 'et' is used throughout the text.²¹

Cappelli's work is an essential resource for deciphering and transcribing abbreviations, and the six categories are useful in understanding how medieval scribes worked with texts. However, the overlapping descriptions of the categories and inclusion of the same symbols with the same functions in several categories has made the exercise less useful in the context of this assignment as several categories could be applied to the same abbreviation in the chirograph

Medieval scribes used a range of punctuation marks but only the punctus (.) appears in the chirograph. This fulfils a similar function to the modern comma, indicating a minor pause.²² However, as the same mark is used to indicate certain abbreviations, this created some issues during the transcription process. In general, when the mark is considered to be a punctus it is retained in the text, but where it indicates an abbreviation (such as '.i.' for 'id est') it is omitted.

¹⁸ Cappelli, *Elements of Abbreviation*, pp-18-30.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 30-39.

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 39-43,

²¹ The symbol  is used to represent the word 'et'.

²² Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*.p.85.

Any expansions or additions have been indicated by [] in the transcription and any letters which could not be resolved by [], Any particular areas of difficulty or interest are further explained by footnotes.

Transcription

- 1 Sciant p[re]sentes et fut[ur]i q[uo]d Ego Rotb[er]t[us]²³ p[ri]or Et Convent[us] Eccl[es]ie S[ancte] Marie
- 2 de Mertona Concessim[us] Ailmanno de Wendl²⁴ et heredib[us] suis t[er]ra[m] Illa[m] q[uæ] fuit
- 3 Wlwardi Sewilde,²⁵ et in i[n]crem[en]to i[d est] [____]²⁶ q[ue] fuit Godwini Gromchy ap[ud] Scola[n]d²⁷
- 4 et dimid[iam] dera[m] q[ue] iacet ivxta Claipvte sup[er] q[ua]m Sigar sedit, tenenda[m] ipsi
- 5 et heredib[us] suis in fevdu[m] et hereditat[ia]e p[er] u[t] sol[idos] annuati[lim], Et p[er] libero ser-
- 6 itio suo q[uo]d scilicet ad submonitione[m] n[ost]ram ipse et heredes sui ad pla[-]
- 7 cita n[ost]ra infra Comitatu[m] Sudri[e] fideliter ueniento. P[re] hac concessione
- 8 et tenura q[ua]m ei dam[us] ipse Ailmann[us] nob[is] in capto n[ost]ro homagui[m] fecit
- 9 et fidelitate[m] iuravit. Et heredes sui p[osito] eu[m] facient similiter. hoc u[no] tenem[en]tu[m]
- 10 habeb[i]t q[ua]m diu p[re]dictu[m] censu[m] bene solv[e]rit. Et fideles nob[is] extiterit
- 11 his t[estibus] Will[elmus] de bosevilla. et Gilleb[er]to cleri[cus] et Ardu[us] de Michelia[m] Et ham[us]
- 12 Cleri[cus] de ching et Lefwardus de wendl.

²³ While using two forms of abbreviation, the scribe also appears to have inserted an additional t between the o and the b, which may be scribal error.

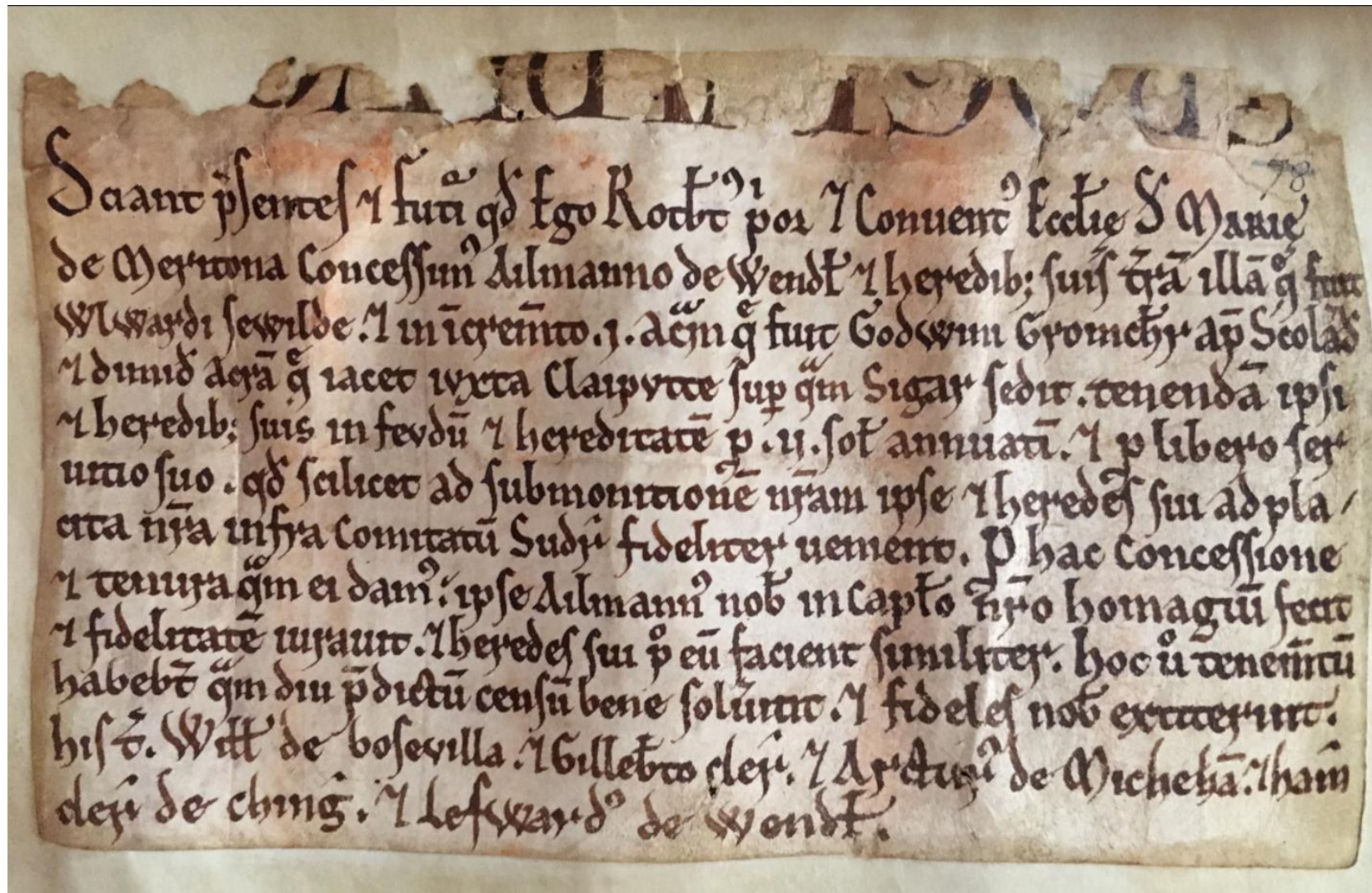
²⁴ As described in the commentary, this abbreviation has been left unresolved.

²⁵ The punctus has been interpreted as a modern comma, to indicate a slight pause.

²⁶ Unable to transcribe this word.

²⁷ A truncation is indicated here by the strike through on final d, although unable to be resolved by the transcriber.

Image of the Merton Priory Chirograph



Bibliography

Primary Source

London

The British Library

Cotton MS Cleopatra C VII

ff. 60-203

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