READING MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTS: SOME TIPS

Reading and understanding medieval documents is not meant to be easy! No matter how long you've been working with them there is always a word that will stump you. Palaeography is an exact science that requires <u>patience</u> and <u>practice</u> and an appreciation of:

LANGUAGE

The vast majority of documents produced in the British Isles from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries (c. 1066-1500) were written either in Latin (the language of the church and law – survived as the language of government record until 1733), Anglo-Norman French (the language of the royal court and the aristocracy) and Middle English (the language of the lower classes and, from around the end of the fourteenth century, the language of literature and government).[1] While you probably won't have to deal with more than one of these in your research, be prepared for some nasty surprises! Always have a good dictionary and/or word-list to hand (see Useful Resources).

HANDWRITING

Most documents produced by royal or episcopal chanceries were written in a standard script which the scribes had been trained to write. Although these scripts changed naturally and gradually over time due to a variety of factors, there is less variance between scribes writing at around the same time than there is between our modern free hands. However, letters were formed very differently than today, and you will need to learn the alphabet for the period you are studying (see Main Reference Works).

ABBREVIATIONS & SPELLING

All medieval texts are abbreviated to some degree, to save both valuable time and parchment. Fortunately, a system of common abbreviations developed across Europe. You aren't ever going to be expected to learn them all. That's impossible! But, you should try and familiarise yourself with the most often used and important abbreviation marks.

Sorry to say that spelling is frustratingly inconsistent, particularly in French and English. Certain letters are interchangeable (i.e. "c/t", "i/j", "i/y", "u/v") and you might find the same word spelled numerous different ways by the same scribe in one document. This can especially confusing with personal and place names.

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[1] Of course, if you are working with Welsh, Scottish or Irish material, then you may find documents in the medieval forms of Welsh or Scots and Irish Gaelic.

Paul Dryburgh & Helen Watt, 2019

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First thing to remember when you have a document in front of you for the first time: DON'T PANIC! There are a few steps that might help if you are struggling to read a word or a phrase:

- ❖ Take it slowly. Try to identify as many letters as you can. <u>Try not to guess</u>.
- ❖ Look for clues in the rest of the sentence or in other parts of the document; if you are struggling with one particular letter, see if you can identify the same character elsewhere in the document in a word you are sure you can read.
- ❖ You might try working backwards from the end of the word.
- ❖ If the word is abbreviated, see what letters you have and then check whether you can find that abbreviated word in one of the reference works listed below.
- ❖ Use optical aids – a magnifying glass is always handy; if the word is faded or stained, and you are in an archive, try to get hold of an ultra-violet lamp; where permitted, take digital photos and use the zoom facility when reading onscreen.
- ❖ Ask for help: if you are in an archive, check with the archivist at the desk. They are usually willing, if not always able, to help. If you are at home or at the University, give me an email or a call. I will help where I can. Just don't take advantage of me!!!

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READING MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTS:

USEFUL REFERENCE WORKS

Dictionaries / Word-Lists

- *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. C.T. Lewis & C. Short (London, 1879 and subsequent reprints).
- *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources. With Supplement*, ed. R.E. Latham (London: British Academy, 1999).
- *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, 17 fascicules, various editors (London: British Academy, 1975-2014; http://www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk/)
- *An Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, ed. Louise W. Stone, T. B. W. Reid & William Rothwell, six volumes, 1977-92. This has now been superseded by *The Anglo-Norman Hub Online* (http://www.anglo-norman.net/).
- *Middle English Dictionary* (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/).
- *The English Dialect Dictionary*, ed. Joseph Wright, six volumes (Oxford, 1905; reprinted 1986).
- *Oxford English Dictionary* (http://www.oed.com/).
- The National Archives Beginners' Latin Tutorial (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latin/beginners/). Great interactive course for complete beginners; uses real documents to teach.
- The National Archives Advanced Latin Tutorial (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latin/advanced/). Interactive course for those with more experience of Latin who want to improve their skills and the range of documents they can read.

Palaeography Aids (for plates of documents and transcriptions/translations)

- *Reading the Past*, ed. P.M. Hoskin & S.L. Slinn (York: Borthwick Publications, 2003). These are available at the Borthwick for £9.50 each (£6 for students) and include facsimiles of original documents, transcriptions/translations and reading notes.
- The National Archives Latin Palaeography Tutorial (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latinpalaeography/). Interactive website with tips on deciphering text, interpreting abbreviations, making transcriptions and solving problems. Includes exercises and facsimiles.
- P. Chaplais, *English Royal Documents, King John – Henry VI, 1199-1461* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) – introduction to English royal government with facsimiles and

transcriptions/translations of key record types; useful for documents in medieval French.

- ❖ L.C. Hector, *The Handwriting of English Documents* (2nd edition, 1966, repr. 1979) – classic guide with facsimiles, transcriptions and reading notes.
- ❖ J. Preston & L. Yeandle, *English Handwriting 1400-1650: An Introductory Manual* (New York, 1992) – more emphasis placed on documents in English, with facsimiles and transcriptions.
- ❖ M.B. Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands, 1250-1500* (Oxford: Oxford Palaeographical Handbooks, 1969) – guide to the hands used in compiling manuscripts in England in the late Middle Ages.

Aids to Interpretation

- ❖ *The Record Interpreter*, ed. C.T. Martin (London, 1910 and later reprints) – list of the most common abbreviations for Latin words, English versions of Latin place names, and English versions of Latin surnames. Worth having to hand!
- ❖ *Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine et Italiane, ed. A. Cappelli* (republished 1999) – more extensive list of medieval abbreviations. Don't be put off that it's in Italian. You will find what you need and it's now online (http://www.hist.msu.ru/Departments/Medieval/Cappelli/).
- ❖ *A Handbook of Dates for Students of British History*, ed. C.R. Cheney, revised M. Jones (Cambridge, 2000) – indispensable for precise dating of medieval documents as it lists regnal and papal years and the changing date of Easter, as well as the Roman dating system used extensively in ecclesiastical records.
- ❖ *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. E.B. Fryde, D.E. Greenway, S. Porter & I. Roy (London: Royal Historical Society, 3rd edition, 1986) – indispensable list of kings, (arch)bishops and leading government officials in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.
- ❖ *Latin for Local History*, ed. E.A. Gooder (2nd edition: London: Longmans, 1978). Introductory guide to the Latin usually found in medieval documents, with practice exercises and translations.

Miscellaneous Reference Works and Useful Websites

- ❖ Publications of the *English Place Name Society* – useful in identifying modern place names from their medieval variant spellings; this is an ongoing project and not every county is covered in full yet (Norfolk, Somerset, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, for example, are not well served).
- ❖ *Victoria County History of England* series – ongoing collection of histories of every county of England, giving a wealth of topography, manorial estates, churches, religious houses; very useful in tracking who held what when; a digital edition can be found at *British History Online*.

- *British History Online* (http://www.british-history.ac.uk/) – a collection of a mass of calendars, editions and guides – VCH, Calendar of Close Rolls, Ancient Deeds, England's Past For Everyone.
- *Calendar of Patent Rolls* (http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/patentrolls/) – online scanned editions (not searchable) of the *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1216-1452*. Very useful for home research.
- *Henry III Fine Rolls Project* (http://www.frh3.org.uk/) – pioneering website with calendars of the original rolls, linked to images (useful for palaeography practice), sophisticated electronic indexes and research material.
- *The Gascon Rolls Project 1317-1468* (http://gasconrolls.org/en/) – online edition of the rolls which record correspondence relating to the administration of English Gascony in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with high-quality digital images and commentary.
- *Anglo-American Legal Tradition* (http://aalt.law.uh.edu/) – enormous database of images of medieval legal records held at The National Archives. This is a great resource of images to help with palaeography but it has no transcriptions or translations. It is clunky to use and has no real referencing system.
- *Mapping the Medieval Countryside* (http://blog.inquisitionspostmortem.ac.uk/) research project based at the University of Winchester, aiming to digitise back volumes of Inquisitions Post Mortem – surveys taken after the death of tenants-in-chief to assess what land they held and what value it was, or to prove the age of an heir in order that he might inherit – and to publish new editions for the second half of the reign of Henry VI.
- *England's Immigrants 1330-1550. Resident Aliens in England in the Later Middle Ages* (http://www.englandsimmigrants.com/) – research project based at the University of York, producing a database of the names of all aliens taxed and resident in England between 1330 and 1550, and various research volumes.
- *The Soldier in Late Medieval England* (http://www.icmacentre.ac.uk/soldier/database/) – database created by the Universities of Reading and Southampton of all men recorded as mustering to join the armies of the English kings in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
- *Cause Papers of the Diocesan Courts of York, 1300-1858* (http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/causepapers/) research project based at the University of York and the Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield, to produce a database of the 15000 surviving cases pleaded before the church courts of York from the fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Digital images of all cases are provided through the website and York's Digital Library micro-site. The database contains records for possibly one million people from, mainly, the north of England, but also from the rest of England, the British Isles and as far afield as America, Sweden and Russia. The cases deal with the moral and spiritual lives of parishioners and concern things such as adultery, marriage, defamation of character, the shedding of blood in church, tithe and tax disputes and the regulation of churchyards.