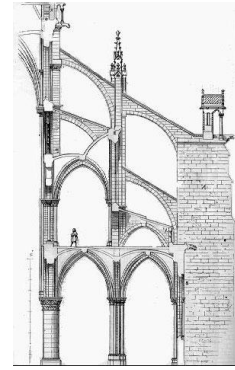


MDST 300: Basic Terms for Understanding Medieval Manuscripts

(Note: this is cobbled together from a number of sources without attribution, so please don't quote it verbatim; look the terms up in Parkes, Preston & Yandle, Bischoff/Ganz, or some equally good book I can point you to if needed. A good introductory bibliography of paleography and codicology can be found at <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/subjects/mss/paleobib.html>.)



codicology – the study of books, especially their construction and binding, as physical objects.

paleography – the study and interpretation of handwriting, especially pre-modern handwriting.

diplomatic - study of the formal qualities of a document, including standardised forms of wording and layout

I. The Physical Object

manuscript- a text that has been copied by hand as opposed to printed. Term first appears about 1594; in Old English the term is 'handgewrit' and in Middle English, simply 'bok.' It is abbreviated **MS**; the plural is **MSS**.

codex - The modern book form, comprised of pages pasted or bound together, usually with an outside binding. This is opposed to the **roll** or **scroll**, the more common form in pre-medieval European societies and used for institutional record keeping well into the fifteenth century.

quire or gathering - An assemblage of folia which have been folded once and stitched together to make a booklet or signature. Several gatherings are put together to make a codex or book. Sometimes a group of quires may be gathered together in a pamphlet, and then those pamphlets are bound together as a larger book; this can be a paleographic nightmare.

folio - a 'page' of a manuscript; abbrev. as **fol.** or **f.**, e.g. f.180 = folio 180

bifolium – the two-page 'v' of conjoined pages in a manuscript. In medieval practice, usually a skin would be folded and cut to produce two **bifolia** (**quarto** size); four bifolia (**octavo** size); or, more rarely, six (**duodecimo**) or eight (**sextodecimo**) folios in size. Papermakers followed this practice in the early ages of printing, which is why book sizes today are still very close to the sizes they were in the Middle Ages.

recto - the face of a manuscript page; in an (open) codex, the exposed side of the right-hand page; abbrev. as **r**, e.g. f.179r = the recto of folio 179

verso - the back of a manuscript page; in an (open) codex, the exposed side of the left-hand page; abbrev. as **v**, e.g. f.179v = the verso of folio 179

Dating Conventions

The dating of manuscripts is often indicated in a compressed form using roman numerals, as thus-

's. x' indicates a 10th-century manuscript, 's. ix' indicates a 9th-century manuscript, &c., &c.

's.' stands for Latin *saeculo*, meaning 'century'.

Futher conventions include:

Superscript '1' for first half of a century: **s. x¹** for 900-950 C.E.

Superscript '2' for second half of a century: **s. x²** for 950-1000 C.E.

Superscript 'in' for first quarter of a century: **s. xⁱⁿ** for 900-925 C.E.

Superscript 'ex' for final quarter of a century: **s. x^{ex}** for 975-1000 C.E.

Superscript 'med' for two middle quarters of a century: **s. x^{med}** for 925-975 C.E.AD

Turn of a century may be indicated by **s. ix^{ex}-s. xⁱⁿ** (for 875-925 C.E.) or by **c. 900**

For more specific range of dates or for a more specific approximate date 'c.' for *circa* may be used.

Dates given in Arabic numerals, unaccompanied by 'c.', are precise dates, e.g., 687x702 specifies the period between 687-702 C.E.

parchment - A writing surface made from mammalian skin, usually sheepskin or goatskin. The BL describes all manuscripts as being written on parchment.

vellum - A deluxe type of parchment made from calfskin. The very finest was made from fetal calfskin. The Bodleian library describes all manuscripts as being written on vellum.

II. Preparation of the Manuscript for Copying

flesh side - A parchment folio has two sides: the flesh side and the hair side. Skin originally has two sides, one that faces the inside of the animal and another that originally faced the outside. When skin is converted to parchment, the flesh side becomes smoother and the hair side is thicker; one can often distinguish individual follicles on the flesh side of a folio.

hair side - See flesh side.

spine – the folded edge of a quire; the “bound” edge of a codex.

head – the top edge of a quire (when the manuscript or quire is closed).

tail – the bottom edge of a quire (when the manuscript or quire is closed).

fore-edge - The outside edge of the book where the book opens (opposite of the **spine**).

sewing station – the holes in the spine through which the thread passes to attach the quires to the binding.

prickings - Small holes made in the margins of a page, which were the guides for laid lines

laid lines - The usually faint lines which marked the baseline for a line of text on the page. Although rare in modern printed books and common in modern notebooks, medieval readers expected text to be framed by these lines.

plummet - method of ruling the guide lines on a page using red lead

catchword - a word written in the margin on the last page of a gathering, being the first word of the next gathering

quire signature - the ordering mark instructing the illustrator and/or binder as to in what order quires should be assembled into a finished manuscript, typically numbers or letters – ‘i’ / ‘ii’ / ‘iii’, ‘a’ / ‘b’ / ‘c’, etc. Usually on the first few leaves of each quire (‘a i,’ ‘a ij,’ ‘a iij,’ etc.) and often lost to cropping. Medieval manuscripts rarely have page numbers; most of the numbering systems you see in manuscripts have been added by later readers or librarians, often incorrectly.

iron gall ink - a brownish ink made from various formulations which included ferrous sulphate and the galls from oak leaves

cropping- Trimming the manuscript for binding (or more often, for re-binding); a time when text near the margins is often lost or truncated, flyleaves with provenance information are removed, quires gotten out of order, and paleographers are driven to strong words and drink.

III. Scripts and Letter Forms

ascender - The upper stem of a lower case letter, as in **b**, **d** and **k**.

descender - The lower stems of letters such as **p**, **q**, and **f**.

minim - A downstroke that is as tall as the body height of the script.

majuscule - A script written two lines only, with no portions of the letters extending below or above either line. Also called bilinear or capitals or uppercase. Example: **HERE BIGYNNETH THE TALES OF CAUNTERBURY.**

miniscule - Any noncapital letter. Miniscule scripts contain letters of uneven height because of the ascenders and descenders. Also called lowercase. Example: Whanne that Aprille with his shoures soote.

ligature - The linking of two letters by one or more strokes. Sometimes called ‘biting.’

gothic bookhand- probably what most people think of when they think of medieval handwriting. It is not a single style or type, but a whole evolving family of scripts which survived until the days of the printing press, and beyond in some countries. Evolved from Carolingian miniscule in the 12th century; noted for

more regular and clubbed serifs on minims, a tighter layout on the line to allow more text to be included, and a clear, legible script form. By 13th century, also called 'textura' or 'textualis.' This is the hand used in most religious and university texts (often highly abbreviated in the latter); the very neat, precise version used in Books of Hours is sometimes called 'textura quadrata' for the squareness of the letters.

cursive - script which is rapidly written as letters are joined together. Used in documents, letters, and literary manuscripts.

Anglicana formata - formal cursive script used as a book hand in England in the 14th century. Most of Chaucer's manuscripts are copied in some register of Anglicana.

bastard Anglicana - book hand used in England in the 14th century, a blending of Gothic textura with cursive Anglicana.

court hand - document hand produced by one of the official legal, legislative or administrative offices of government

secretary hand – originally a French cursive document hand, adopted more widely as a book hand in the 14th century and later. Characteristic English hand from about 1440 onward.

Textura

IV. Conventions of the Text

incipit- The opening words of a text, not to be confused with the title or introductory remarks, but the actual beginning lines of the text. An important guide in determining the source of the text. Because so many medieval books are acephalous, medieval (and modern) library catalogues often record the "second folio incipit"—that is, the first words on the recto of the second page of the first quire of the manuscript. Often written as '2nd fo. incipit words from the text.'

explicit- The closing words of the text itself, not to be confused with the colophon.

colophon- The closing remarks of the scribe at the end of the text, such as "Thank God I finished this text in 300 days" or "The monk Gerasim wrote this in the year 1237." Not to be confused with the explicit, the ending of the text itself. Colophons are important codicological tools used to date and assign provenance to a manuscript.

acephalous – a 'headless' text, one that has lost a page (or more) at the beginning of the text.

anurous – a text 'without a tail', one that has lost a page (or more) at the end of the text. This is used more in Greek and Latin paleography; most descriptions in English will say "lacks....").

Michelle Brown's great glossary is now online:

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/glossary.asp>