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Writing and Literacy in the Medieval Period

An Insight Report

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1. WHO COULD READ IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD?

It has been suggested that it was not until the 13th century in England, that society could be described as 'collectively literate'. The proportion of those who could read is difficult to establish, but it seems clear that by c. AD 1200, everyone was likely to know someone who could read. It appears that within the previous 150 years, being able to read was a skill which had gone from being associated particularly with royalty, nobility and monks, to an ability seen amongst those on city and town councils, and also officials such as stewards and bailiffs in the countryside.

2. 'COMPOSING'



Figure 1: A replica of wax tablets found at Swinegate

At this time, writing was a separate competency from reading, because the use of parchment and quills made it difficult. Unlike today, when the two disciplines are generally taught together, not all readers would be confident to write a document or letter themselves. There were two distinct stages in the creation of a document or manuscript.

The first was known as 'composing,' and this typically entailed the recording of dictation in note form, usually onto wax tablets. This method of working was recorded by the monk Orderic Vitalis in the 12th century when he wanted to copy a book. He states that he 'made a full and accurate abbreviation on tablets, and now I shall endeavour to entrust it summarily to parchment'. It is clear that those who could not themselves read nor even write their own name could nevertheless have letters written on their behalf by 'composing' them – and dictating them – to another who could record them in note form and then make fair copies in writing.



Figure 2: The Swinegate Tablets

A wonderful mid-14th century example of such wax tablets was recovered during excavations by York Archaeological Trust at 12-18 Swinegate, York. Measuring only c.50mm long x 30mm wide, the set was wrapped in a decorative leather cover and comprised eight tablets made of boxwood each about 1.5mm thick. The wax on each face of the tablets still bore writing that could be partially read. One text is part of a Middle English poem, a second appears to be a list or set of accounts, and the third is part of a legal document or letter written in Latin. A small iron stylus with a flattened head for use as an eraser, and a pointed tip for pressing into the wax was also present in the set. It is clear that the owner of the tablets was an educated note-writer, familiar with both written Latin and English.

<http://www.yorkarchaeology.co.uk/resources/finding-the-future/resilience-year-1-2/take-a-letter/>

Further examples of styli found in York include one made of iron found at the College of the Vicars Choral at the Bedern and a copper alloy example recovered from the site at 37 Bishophill Senior.



Figure 3: A copper alloy stylus found at Bishophill Senior, York

Bone implements with iron points have been found on several sites across York including 12-18 Swinegate and the College of the Vicars Choral at the Bedern. The functions of these tools have been debated over the past thirty years or so. Some suggest that they are styli, and others have identified them as 'parchment prickers', used to mark out the spacing of lines on parchment by making tiny holes through several layers of parchment at the edges of the pages. The bone 'prickers' are all lathe-turned, with iron tips, and with spherical heads, but a plain wooden example has also been found on a site at 1-2 Tower Street which lay within the precincts of the Franciscan or 'Greyfriars' Friary.



Figure 4: Bone parchment prickers found at Bedern

3. WRITING

So, the term 'writing' in the medieval period referred to the making of fair and permanent copies on parchment, taken from the notes made on wax tablets. Scribes or text-writers would be employed to write documents on parchment on behalf of those who could not do it for themselves. 'Scriveners' were legal specialists who used their knowledge to translate the needs of their clients into legally formulated written documents, such as contracts and deeds. In York, the Guild of Scriveners had been set up by the end of the 14th century, with the aim of controlling not just the activities of those involved in the creation of legal documents, but also the general trade of writing, the illuminating of manuscripts, certain legal activities and some early book-keeping, all within the city itself.

Lead-ruled lines came into use on manuscripts by the end of the 11th century, and were normally in use by the 12th century. Rods of lead alloy with pointed tips, and flattened ends which have been found on a number of sites in York including Fishergate, Coppergate and Bedern, may have been used in a similar way to pencils. Some have been interpreted as possibly being used by scribes on parchment while others are thought to have been employed by craftsmen such as carpenters for marking up timbers. Examples of both types of lead point have been found in York, although the vast majority have been identified as likely to have belonged to craftsmen.



Figure 5: *Lead alloy point, possibly used by scribes on parchment*



Figure 6: *Lead alloy point, possibly used for marking up timbers*

Objects made from bird radii were found at the College of the Vicars Choral, and similar examples, with obliquely cut and pointed ends, found elsewhere have been interpreted by some scholars as possible writing equipment. None of the radii found at the College bears any traces of ink, and so it is unlikely these were ink pens. Other suggestions for their use have included scooping out or measuring quantities of softened oak galls for preparation with boiling water as ink, pipettes for charging quill pens, or providing shafts for broken quills. A fragment of a probable quill pen was found on a site on Aldwark, not far from the College.



Figure 7: *Bone 'pens' found at the College of the Vicars Choral and a possible quill found on a site at Aldwark*

A fragment of what appears to be the expanded end of one tip of a pair of tweezers found at Bedern has been interpreted as part of a parchment holder, similar to a modern day bulldog clip. Made of copper alloy, this has been decorated with incised line decoration and has also been tinned, which would have given it a silvery appearance. It clearly shows where the arm of the clip was attached to the plate, and it lacks the in-turned ends characteristic of cosmetic tweezers. All of these features point to this being part of a fastener that would be suitable for holding 'papers' together or possibly holding down the pages of a book while reading.



Figure 8: Possible copper alloy tweezers could have been used as a part of a parchment holder

Although many of these items associated with writing were found at the Vicars Choral College, there is no evidence that it was a centre of manuscript production. In the early 15th century, however, a building was erected to house the College's collection of documents, so it seems most likely that these derive from the production of written records relating to the College's activities and its administration.

4. AUTHENTICATING DOCUMENTS



Figure 9: Some of the seal matrices found in York

In order to authenticate a document that had been written by another, the signatory - who might have little or no skill in literacy - would use a wax seal, which was sometimes personalised with the sealer's name. These seals were seen as adding strength and physical reinforcement to the document, and on occasion phrases added to the charter or contract demonstrate this. One example notes 'so that this gift and grant of mine and confirmation of my charter may last in perpetuity, I have reinforced the present writing with the impress of my seal'. The seal was made by putting wax made from a mixture of beeswax and resin into an engraved metal matrix, and it is these matrices which survive in the archaeological record.

Most seal matrices which have been recovered as a result of excavation or metal detecting are made of copper alloy, that is an alloy of copper with another metal such as tin (bronze) or zinc (brass). Other materials such as bone or ivory were sometimes used: an example of one of these from Aldwark, York is the mid-12th century ivory seal of Snarrus the toll gatherer. This depicts Snarrus with his purse of toll money in the centre with the legend +SIGI . SNARRI . THEOLENARII.



Figure 10: Mid-12th century ivory seal depicting Snarrus the toll gatherer

From the early 13th century, metal became the dominant material for seal matrices. The typical design was as seen on the seal of Snarrus, with its pictorial symbol in the centre, and a legend around the circumference, although these inscriptions did not always include the name of the seal's owner. The matrices were usually circular, or sometimes oval, and often featured a projecting handle which might be pierced to enable the matrix to be suspended from its owner's belt. In addition to Snarrus, several named individuals have appeared on matrices from York excavations: a disc-shaped matrix found in excavations on the site of the former York College for Girls in Low Petergate depicts a central motif of an eight-spoked wheel and an inscription which reads: S(IGILLUM) DE ROB(ER)TI HOROLOGIARII DE and then, less clearly, four letters which appear something like IERM. This translates as 'The seal of Robert the clockmaker from (?) Yarmouth', and the shape of the matrix indicates that it probably dates from c.1300. If Robert was involved in making mechanical clocks, he would be a very early example of such a clockmaker; it is perhaps more likely that he produced 'water clocks' which as the name suggests recorded the passing of time by measuring the rate of flow of a specific amount of water from one receptacle to another. If the owner of this seal lived and worked in York, it seems probable that he would have been employed by York Minster or perhaps St Mary's Abbey, both of whom would have needed mechanisms to enable them to identify the correct times for the performing of services throughout the day and night.

Another craftsman recorded on a matrix is 'Thomas of Swin (?Swine) Stonemason' (S. THOME D' SWIN CEMENTARIUS) who is himself depicted kneeling below the figures of God and the Virgin Mary; this matrix was found at the site of the College of the Vicars Choral at the Bedern .



Figure 11: The Clockmaker seal found at Low Petergate, York



Figure 12: Seal matrix with S. THOME D' SWIN CEMENTARIUS inscription, found at the College of the Vicars Choral



Figure 13: A line drawing of the seal with THOME D' SWIN CEMENTARIUS inscription ('Thomas of Swin (?Swine) Stonemason')

A personalized matrix found in a 13th – late 14th century level in excavations of the Gilbertine Priory of St. Andrew on Fishergate had been deliberately cut in half when it was lost and this has been likened to the cutting up of a personal credit card in the modern era to prevent use by another. This seal depicts an outstretched arm holding a falcon or hawk, and the surviving inscription reads '...OME:DEBELEBIO', perhaps referring to a Thomas of Bielby or Belby.



Figure 14: Seal depicting an outstretched arm holding a falcon or a hawk, found on Fishergate

The Vicars Choral site at Bedern also produced a matrix depicting a squirrel with a non-personalised legend which reads 'I CRAKE NOTIS' (I crack nuts), possibly using the analogy of cracking open nuts for the 'cracking open' of the seal. Religious symbols are commonly found on non-personalised matrices; at least two matrices with a stag motif, (representative of Christ who tramples and destroys the devil), have been recovered in York. Both have religious legends; one, from Bedern, reads '..SV SEL...', with 'SV' probably part of the word and the second, found at the site of St Leonard's Hospital, Museum Street, is inscribed 'TMETEDEVVM' or Timete Deum ('Fear God').



Figure 15: A seal matrix found at Bedern, depicting a squirrel and a legend which reads 'I CRAKE NOTIS' (I crack nuts)

Official papal documents sent out from Rome were also sealed, but these papal bullae, as the seals were known, were made of lead alloy. Lead seals were restricted to use on papal documents only and it is believed that lead was used because the heat often experienced in Italy, where the pope resided, would have melted wax seals. A bulla was attached to a document via a silk ribbon which passed vertically through holes at the top and bottom of the seal. Although first used by popes in the sixth century onwards, the characteristic design employed for centuries and up to modern times was defined at the beginning of the 12th century by Pope Pascal II. On one face are the heads of Saints Peter (on the right as we look) and Paul, separated by a cross; Peter is always represented with a crimped beard and curly hair, while Paul has short or no hair and a long beard. The faces are both encircled by a beaded border -and above them are their abbreviated names: SPA(UL) and SPE(TER). On the

reverse face the name and number of the issuing pope would be recorded followed by the letters PP ('Pastor Pastorum' or 'Shepherd of the Shepherds').

Of four bullae found in excavations in York, three were recovered from medieval burials on the site of All Saints Church, Peasholme Green, and two of these were found on the person of the individual buried in the grave. One which was found on the torso of an individual was issued by Pope Urban VI who was Pope from 1378-1389, whilst another which had been held in the hand had been issued by a Pope Clement, although it was not clear which one as the number was illegible. It is thought that bullae found in graves were likely to have been attached originally to pardons or 'indulgences'. As the name suggests, these papal documents offered a pardon for a lifetime's sins and smoothed the path of the soul through Purgatory. Indulgences were sold by men known as 'Pardoners', and the trade became notorious for corruption, with accusations of forgeries of bullae being widespread in the 14th century. The only other bulla recovered from excavations by York Archaeological Trust was found at the site of the Hospital of St. Leonards It was studied by an expert at the time of its finding in 2003, who noted inconsistencies in the shapes of the letters spelling out the late 12th century pope's name, suggesting that it might itself be a forgery.



Figure 16: A bulla issued by Pope Urban VI recovered during the excavations at the site of All Saints Church, Peasholme Green



Figure 17: A bulla found on site of Peasholme Green, issued by Pope Clement



Figure 18: A bulla recovered at the site of the Hospital of St. Leonards

5. BOOKS

Books are effectively collections of writings, and in the medieval period, these might comprise collections of legal documents relating to an estate, of poems or recipes, accounts of the lives of Saints, or Books of Hours containing prayers. Sometimes a single book would be made up of a range of different writings; for instance the *Chronica Majora* by the 13th century writer Matthew Paris included a history, a monastic chronicle, charters, an atlas, writings on heraldry, as well as drawings and paintings. In terms of construction, books typically comprised a series of 'quires' or gatherings, rather like booklets which were then bound together. Once the quires had been assembled in the correct order, they would be sewn together to form a book – usually the gatherings would be sewn onto leather cords or thongs which ran horizontally across the spine which had been formed by the pile of ordered quires. Wooden boards, usually made of oak, would form the protective covers and these in turn were sometimes covered with leather, which on particularly important or precious books would be decorated with stamped designs or occasionally metal mounts.



Figure 19: Representation of a book clasp on a statue of an apostle found in St Mary's Abbey. Courtesy of the Yorkshire Museum.

Leather straps with metal clasps were sometimes used to secure a book shut, as seen on the statue of an apostle from St. Mary's Abbey which features a hinged fitting very similar to one found at the Gilbertine Priory of St. Andrew, and others from Bedern Chapel, and the College of the Vicars Choral. Another form of clasp features one hooked over end with the other end being decoratively notched and with rivets for attachment to the strap. Examples from the Vicars Choral College and the Gilbertine Priory of St. Andrew both have ring-and-dot decoration.



Figure 20: Book clasps made from copper alloy



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