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on Religious Studies



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Public Report

HANDWRITING STYLES

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Christoph Winterer: Handwriting styles as clues for the dating of medieval manuscripts

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Christoph Winterer

Handwriting styles as clues for the dating of medieval manuscripts¹

Introduction

This paper serves as a handout for non-specialists and posits a rough date for medieval codices based on the handwriting. The paper presents examples of different handwriting styles that were used during the Middle Ages; especially Carolingian minuscule, Capitalis quadrata, Romanesque minuscule, Gothic minuscule, textualis, textura, and Bastard. It also shows how these orthographic styles can be used to date medieval books within a range of a century or generation.

Paper

Anyone who tries to classify a manuscript fragment will always feel the need to assign a date and a place of origin to it. Without any clues from the content, even most scientists find it difficult to date manuscripts more precisely and will not offer more than a certain country and time period. Assigning a date is, of course, difficult, because on a randomly obtained manuscript fragment one will hardly ever find a date written by the scribe. The period when a text was written, the mention of a person known to us or a newly established Church festival may in some cases indicate a timeframe around which the fragment could have originated. However, even this timeframe might be worthless in the not uncommon case that the text found on the fragment stems from Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages, but was copied centuries later. Paleographic research, however, has progressed so far from the beginning of the 20th century that it can help to date medieval book scripts to within a century or sometimes even to a generation.

The samples presented here can only be suggestions – because of their small number – of how to look at medieval fragments more precisely and to try to make a rough assessment. Dating a text comes with experience and with being exposed to fragments or manuscripts regularly. For an examination and a precise dating it is recommended to consult specialists, like the employee of a manuscript centre of the German Research Foundation in a large library.

Here only samples of script (from manuscripts of ecclesiastical libraries and museums) are shown, which are already dated by inscriptions etc. This reminds us of a basic precondition to paleographic dating; namely that paleographic dating can only be “relative” to securely dated objects of comparison.

The presentation of pre- and early- Carolingian scriptures, i.e. from the period between about 600 and 780/800, was left out of consideration here because new discoveries in this timeframe happen rarely.

¹ Transl. of: *Mittelalterliche Schriften als Datierungshilfen*, in: Sorbello Staub, Alessandra/Winterer, Christoph: *Das Ganze im Fragment. Handschriftenfragmente aus kirchlichen Bibliotheken, Archiven und Museen*, Petersberg 2015, p. 59–64.



Furthermore, it is hard to create an overview of this epoch because it is characterized by the fact that at different locations very diverse scripts were created. The development and circulation of the “Carolingian minuscule” (fig. 1) after 780 A.D. has resulted in a deep incision in European history. It succeeded in ousting the competing pre-Carolingian handwritings in the Franconian Empire and gradually ascended to the dominant script in almost the whole of Europe. The minuscule emerged from the ancient uncial, which was still used even up until the early 12th century, but only for headlines (cf. fig. 1 and 2). The new script was smaller than the uncial and had more distinctive upper and lower lengths. The letters were written in a space-saving way, but are still clearly distinct and readable. This script corresponds in large part to our present-day small script, wherein of course no *i*-points, no *w* and no sharp *v* is to be expected. A round *s* is used in the Carolingian minuscule only extremely seldomly and only at the end of the word in the ligature (conjoined letters) *vs*; otherwise, a long *s* is common, which can be easily mistaken for an *f*. At the beginning, there were many ligatures such as *nt* and *ex* and a closed *a* next to an *a*, which looks like *cc*, that were later discarded (in fig. 1 e.g. on line 3 in: “scientia”).

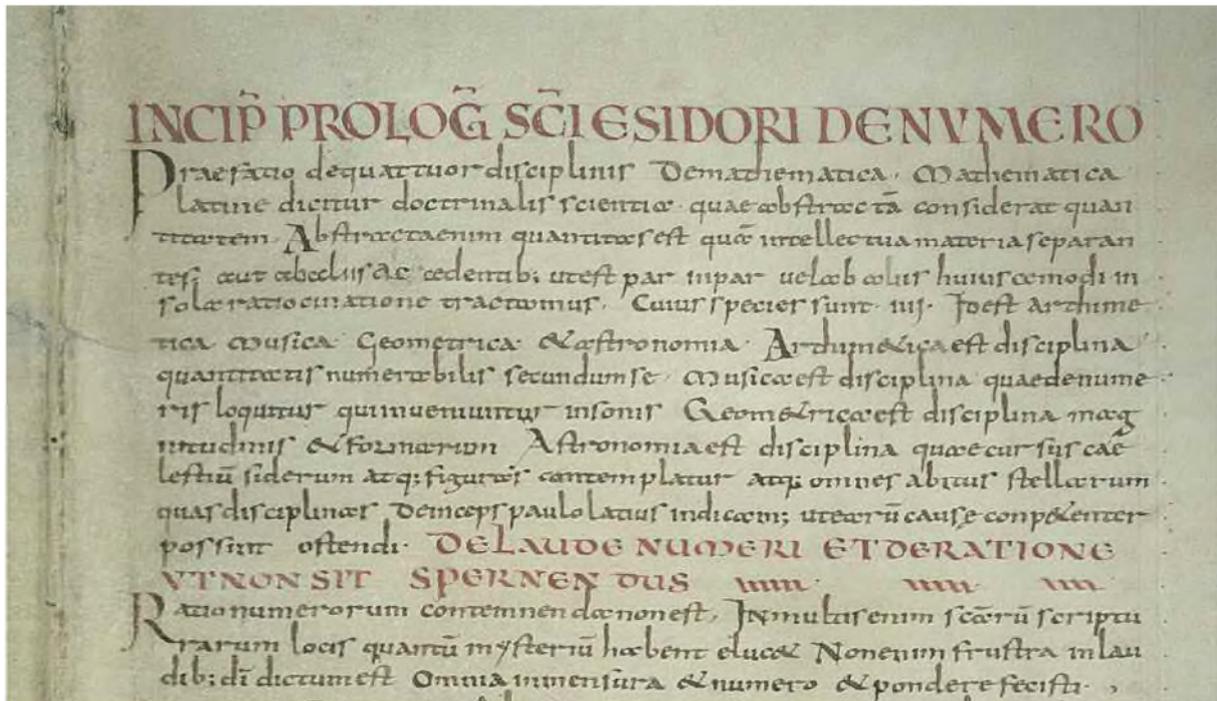


Figure 1: Datable 805. Carolingian minuscule for the main text, an imperfect Capitalis quadrata for rubrication and uncial for the subheadings. Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 83 II, fol. 15r.

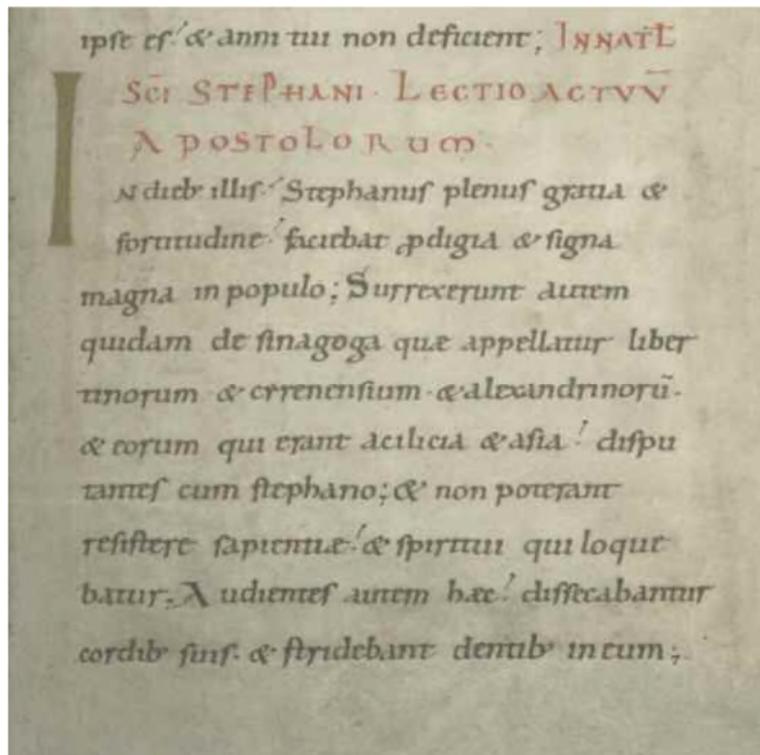


Figure 2: Between 985 and 999. Carolingian minuscule in Ottonian style, the rubric begins with Capitalis rustica and changes to uncial. Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 143, fol. 9r.

The Carolingian minuscule from the Ottonian and Salian time (approx. 900–1100) is hard to distinguish from the one used in the Carolingian period (fig. 2), especially since the wide distribution of this script has created many regional variations. A few indicators can help: the individual letters of this time are usually less rounded, because they are stretched more in height; the words are more clearly separated from each other and seem more closed. The old ligatures have almost all disappeared; only *et*, *st* and sometimes *ct* remain. The *ę* (e caudata, tailed e) slowly supplanted the *ae* (which is why the *æ* is rather unusual in fig. 2). Above all, however, the upper and descending lengths of *p*, *q*, *s*, *f* and *d* continue to shrink over time. The Carolingian minuscule is still the most widely used script up until around 1200. However, its stylization changes in Romanesque times (about 1100–1200), so that it can also be spoken of as the Romanesque minuscule. The writing becomes steeper (fig. 3), which has a striking impact on the individual letters: the back of the *a* is always steeply erected, the loops of the *o*, *p*, *d* and *b* are not round, but oval to sharply oval. The sub-length of the *r* disappears, a round *s* at the end of the word becomes more frequent. The more frequent shortcuts such as an *i* above the *q* for *qui*, a superscript *9* for the ending *us*, a *w* above a *q* for *qua*, are celebrated. In addition, the words are more clearly delineated and blocky than in the Ottonian period. The headline or the first line after the initials – as in our example – are no longer written in the pure antique scripts, but in regionally-influenced fantasy forms which are summarized under the generic term *majuscule*. In the High Middle Ages, the *textualis* (fig. 4) is a new form of script. Its predecessor, the Gothic minuscule, was already used in northern France, England and today's Belgium in the second half of the 12th century and subsequently spread throughout Germany, beginning in the west. From just before the middle of the 13th century, the calligraphic more stylized *textualis* gradually takes its place. This script,



which emerged from the Carolingian minuscule, is characterized, first of all, by strong, horizontal lines that are very light and thin, as well as by the refraction of original round shapes. Small connections on the feet of the letters reinforce the feeling of the togetherness of the words. The upper lengths are short in comparison to the older tendencies, and the shafts are split. The s at the end of a word is now almost always round. The old ligatures become lesser and the new letter combinations – the so-called bow connections, in which the backs of neighboring letters merge – more frequent; in our example, this happens only with *or*, but soon also for letter pairs like *do*, *de* and *po*. A reference for the dating of the textualis in the 13th century is the form of the letter *a*, however, the local context must be considered: gradually the *a* becomes a double-decker letter, because the upper arch almost conjoins with the lower part. In 1250, this tendency can be observed on the Middle Rhine, by 1275 also in Bavaria. However, in the second third of the 15th century, under the influence of other scripts, an *a* appears with only one bow without an upper one.

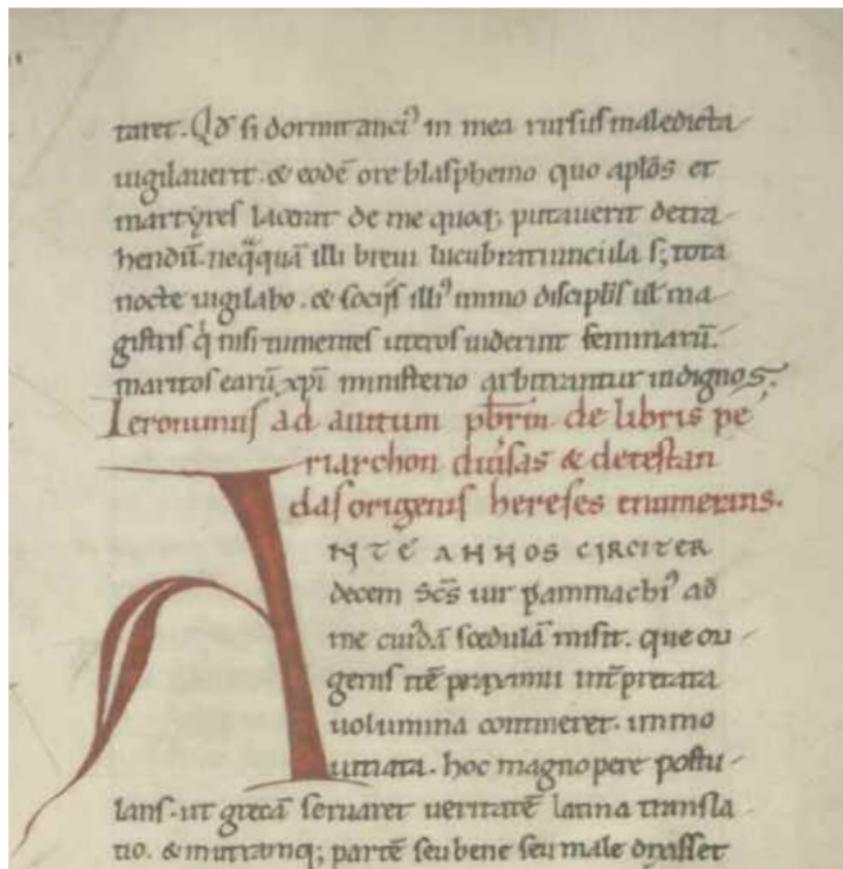


Figure 3: Between 1100 and 1131. Carolingian minuscule in Romanesque characteristic. The black Initial line after the A in a Romanesque majuscule. Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 59, fol. 12r.

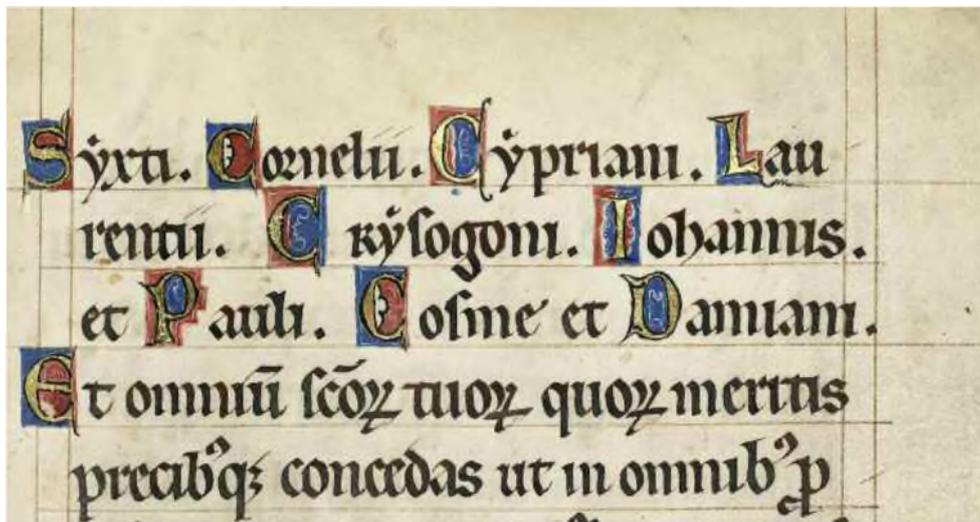


Figure 4: Datable 1241–1245. Early textualis. Stiftung Dome und Schlösser in Sachsen-Anhalt, Domschatz Halberstadt, Inv.-Nr. 474 (olim: Hs 114), fol. 24r.

Textualis is used in all later centuries of the Middle Ages, both in library and in liturgical manuscripts. Its specific appearance can therefore be determined, not only by regional specificities, but also by fashions and the calligraphic level. Figure 7, for example, shows a simple textualis without embellishments and written in narrow lines, which was written in 1456 in Cologne.

Textualis can have different gradations of gothic stylization, the highest level is achieved with the textualis formata or textura (fig. 5), which appeared at the end of the 13th century. Because it was used in particular for liturgical manuscripts – one also speaks of missal lettering – it is often used for cover fragments. Unfortunately, it is extraordinarily difficult to date. Even experts are often unable to date a textura-writing more precisely than the 14th–15th century. If there are no other dating aids accessible (other writings, book decorations), one should pay attention to the fact that this writing became more and more perfect over time, but also more static and routinized. Also, in the late 15th century, exaggerated embellishments are noticeable. With the textura the interruptions of the lines are so rigorously carried out that there are hardly any roundings; the middle of the letters are the measure of all things, upper and lower lengths, even the lower loop of the g, are written closely to the center of the letter. The so-called “quadrangles” are also part of the textura. These are cross-posed rectangles, which form the upper and – except for a special variant of the textura with, so to speak, cut-off feet – also the lower degrees of the letter stems. They are recognizably created on the basis of the broken roundings of the *n* and *m*, making the letters within the individual words even more dense. As a result, the letter boundaries are often difficult to determine when *i*, *m*, *n* and *u/v* follow each other. In our example, it becomes difficult at the beginning of the 1st line reproduced here with the word “universi”.



Figure 5: Dated 1299. Textura (textualis formata), rubrication in textualis. Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 1001b, fol. 3r.

Since even the textualis is difficult to write, but more and more books are produced in the 14th and 15th century, a need for easier forms of writing is inevitable. Cursive writing used in law firms (comparable to today's italic letters) now also appear in text manuscripts in late medieval times, but they are comparatively difficult to read and aesthetically not very demanding. At the end of the 14th century cursive scripts were combined with the textualis in the Bastard (fig. 6). As a mixed writing, it of course has many variations which are determined by the desired calligraphic standard. Due to the close lettering spelling of the words (loops at the top of the *b*, *d* and *l* and a one-story *a*), the Bastard is easy to write, nevertheless maintaining the calligraphic stylization through gothic fractioning. Without proficiency in this field, only the loop-free Bastard is comparatively easy to date, because it appeared in the 15th century mainly in west and northwest Germany and in the context of monastic reforms. Since the Bastard was mainly a style used for the huge amounts of manuscripts on paper, it can often be found on complete manuscripts but hardly ever on bookbinding fragments, because these were mainly made out of parchment.

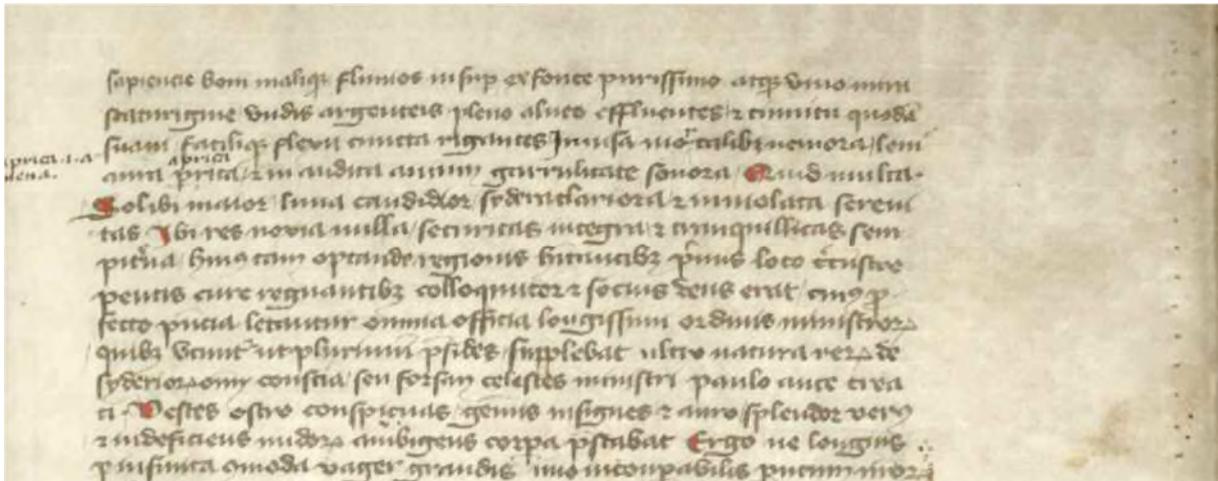


Figure 6: Dated 1399. Bastard of a high standard. Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 168, fol. 3r.

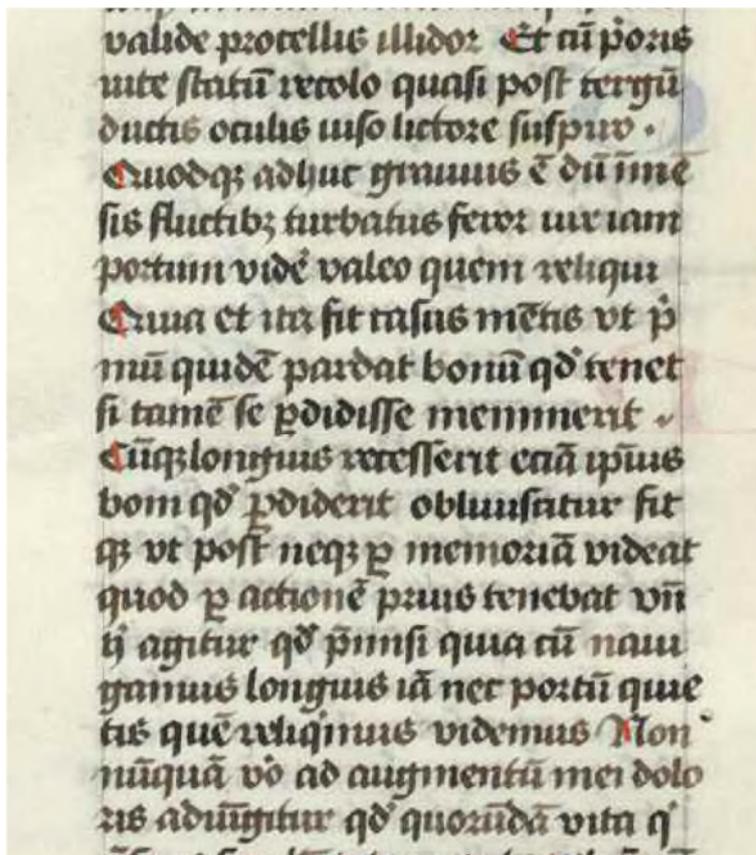


Figure 7: Dated 1459. Textualis, striking the a with only one bow ("einstöckiges a"). Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln, Cod. 90, fol. 3r.

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