

# MEDIEVAL COLOPHONS: A VARIETY OF SCRIBAL ANNOTATIONS

Óskar Völundarson

*Óskar Völundarson is a student of the Book and Digital Media Studies MA programme at Leiden University. He has a bachelor's degree in history and philosophy from the University of Iceland.*

Take a walk around any city or urban area and chances are you will see a fair amount of graffiti on the walls, often imaginative and colourful, though not always pretty. These are signs of people marking their territory, putting a personal stamp on their environment. Similarly, go to the movies and stay through the end credits to see every single lighting assistant and coffee-provider enumerated. Very few read the credits, yet everyone has to be listed. There is a sense of the crew wanting to have their work acknowledged in some way.

This impulse is not exclusive to modern society. The people who had the means to leave a written mark back in the Middle Ages, principally the medieval scribes, in some cases did exactly that. The annotations left by these professional copyists in medieval manuscripts are called colophons. Though the colophons are not as anarchic as street graffiti tends to be, both can be seen as personal marks. They are examples of people making a note of their existence. It is important to note that colophons are only found in a relatively small number of manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> They were not a standard practice and are therefore often, or so it seems, down to the whim of the scribe.

The colophons vary greatly in their content, but can include both formal information such as dates, place names and the name of a scribe, as well as personal messages from the scribe to the reader, or even to the heavens. Although this information can give a lot of insight into the circumstances of book production and the origin of manuscripts, the medieval scribe is not a completely reliable authority. Like other historical sources, a single colophon's authority has to be evaluated in the context of what we know to be true of colophon writing in general. This article examines both the variety of the colophons and the uncertainty regarding some of their content.

## Personal content

Writing a manuscript was hard work. The scribes had to have a fast hand, since speed is necessary for writing on parchment with a quill.<sup>2</sup> The custom was that monks devote around six hours of the day to writing.<sup>3</sup> Exhausted scribes working silently in a monastic scriptorium would sometimes vent their misery over their arduous work in a colophon. Some complained about their tired hands and others shared their desire for a well-deserved alcoholic drink.<sup>4</sup> When considering these circumstances, it appears somewhat odd that so few scribes wrote colophons. It seems only natural that scribes, much like the technical assistants in modern film crews, would want to take some credit for the end results, even though the content of the manuscript was not their creation.

One of the colophon's greatest contributions to a manuscript is that it adds personality to an otherwise formal work. They often contain sentences like 'Written by the hand of Johannes Alberti from Groeningen'. Johannes was very eager and wrote it no less than four times in the same manuscript.<sup>5</sup> Some colophons also ask the reader to pray for the scribe. The 15<sup>th</sup> century English scribe John Iwardby simply wrote 'Pray for me' (Fig.1). The human wish to be remembered is maybe best demonstrated by the biographical notes that are sometimes included. A 15<sup>th</sup> century

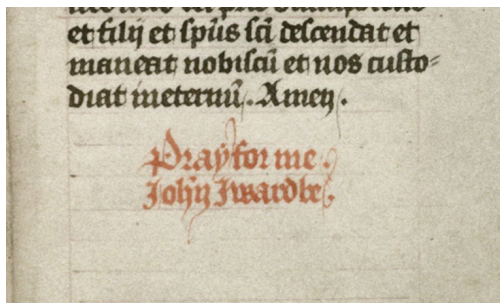


Figure 1. Source: Luna, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. MS. Gough Liturg. 19.

Dominican scribe tells us about the time he fell off the back of his horse and into a river; luckily he was saved by a local peasant and a man from Lanzhut.<sup>6</sup> This is a curiously precise account of the scribe's life; it is a purely personal expression. This type of anecdote is nevertheless an exception, since the majority of colophons have a more formal tone.

### The time of writing

The formal information in a colophon ranges from the relatively general, such as the year the manuscript was completed, to the very precise. Take a 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian colophon for example, where the scribe claims to have finished his work on a Thursday, 31 December and in the 5<sup>th</sup> hour of the night.<sup>7</sup>

When indicating time, the scribes did not always constrict themselves to the months of the calendar. Sometimes they would date the manuscript with a reference to notable events, such as a plague or the birth of a prince.<sup>8</sup> This might appear somewhat odd to a modern reader, since we are not used to seeing time indicated with idiosyncratic allusions – at least not on the page ('Today, the stock exchange will open just after the roosters crow'). In everyday life, however, one would be forgiven for referring to an event as happening 'before the stock exchange opened', omitting the detail that this was 'before 8am on 23 February'. This illustrates how sensibilities for time were different in the Middle Ages. To us, one type of timing is informal and of every-day use. The other is formal and belongs in a written text: It confers greater authority. To the medieval scribe, however, both indicators were equally valid on the page.

Along with other features of the manuscript book, such as the quality of the material it was made of and the amount of decoration on its pages, the precise information given in the colophon may have helped to assure readers that the book in their hands was worth reading. The scholar C. J. Cyrus suggests that 'a manuscript of known provenance might carry more weight with knowledgeable readers than manuscripts of uncertain origins'.<sup>9</sup>

### Textual authority

As clear and straightforward as the colophon information might seem, it cannot simply be taken at face value. For example, it may be that a given colophon is not an original expression of the scribe, but that he simply copied another colophon from an exemplar, the text that he was working with. Suspicions arise for example when the colophon follows the main text

directly without a break in between.<sup>10</sup> Much like other labourers doing long hours of repetitive work, the scribe may well have written the words without their content really registering in his mind. The result is that dates and names belonging to other book productions get copied into books where they don't belong (Fig. 2).

Some scribes also had the nasty habit (in the eyes of manuscript researchers) of travelling around. So even if a manuscript was finished in Rome, most of it may have been written in Sicily.<sup>11</sup>

There is also a problem with the dates. There are many elements to be completed in the production of a manuscript and we don't always know to which one the colophon date refers. Is it saying that the writing of the text was finished on a particular day, or is it referring to the marginal annotations, or perhaps even to other elements such as the decoration?<sup>12</sup> A date is only a piece of the puzzle.

Despite the uncertainties involved in using colophons as historical sources, they are undeniably valuable as records of the presence of mostly invisible participants in the making of manuscripts: The scribes who wrote the text.

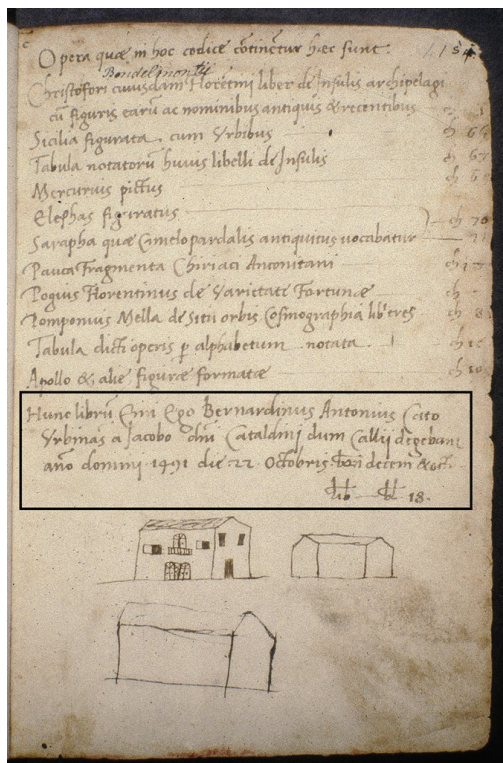


Figure 2. This colophon is stylistically identical to the rest of the text and not clearly separated from it. Is it less likely to be an original? Source: Luna, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. MS. Canon. Misc. 280.

In some cases that is their precise purpose: A scribe reminds us that he and nobody else has laboured over this particular work. Perhaps he does it more subtly than a graffiti artist, but the sentiment is the same. Unfortunately, medieval scribes did not have a standard protocol for relating the circumstances of their work accurately, which means that researchers have to put on their detective hats. It is a reminder of the fact that in reviewing the past, a researcher must second-guess all his sources.

#### Notes

- 1 Overgaauw, E.A. 'Where are the colophons? On the Frequency of Datings in Late-Medieval Manuscripts'. *Sources for the History of Medieval Books and Libraries*. Eds. R. Schlusemann, J.M.M. Hermans and M. Hoogvliet. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999. Print. 81-84.
- 2 Gullick, M. 'How Fast Did Scribes Write? Evidence from Romanesque Manuscripts'. *Making the Medieval Book: Techniques of Production*. Ed. L.L. Brownrigg. London/California: Anderson-Lovelace/The Red Gull Press, 1995. Print. 39-40.
- 3 Avrin, L. *Scribes, Script and Books. The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Chicago and London: American Library Association and The British Library, 1991. Print. 223-224.
- 4 Madan, F. *Books in Manuscripts. A Short Introduction to their Study and Use*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1920. Print. 53-54.
- 5 Lieftinck, G. I. *Manuscripts datés conservés dans les Pays-Bas I, Texte*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1964. MS. Groningue, Bibl. Univ. 101. 18. Original text: 'Scriptus per manus iohannis alberti de groningen'.
- 6 Humphries, K. W. 'Dominicans. The Copying of Books'. *Scribi e colofoni*. Italy: Spoleto, 1995. Print. 131-132.
- 7 Watson, A.G. *Catalogue of Dated and Datable Manuscripts c.435 – 1600 I, The Text*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. MS. Oxford, England. Canon.Misc. 219 fols. 1-12. 51. Original text: '... Et finitus oer me eundem tunc In artibus studentem. eodem. M° et mense die iouis .xxxj. mensis decembris. hora quinta noctis. Adueniente die anni noui.'
- 8 Cyrus, C. J. *The Scribes for Women's Convents in Late Medieval Germany*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto, 2009. Print. 135.
- 9 Ibid. 159-160.
- 10 Jordan, L. 'Problems in Interpreting Dated Colophons Based on Examples from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana'. *Scribi e colofoni. Le sottoscrizioni di copisti dale origini all'avvento della stampa*. Italy: Spoleto, 1995. Print. 368-69.
- 11 Ibid. 370-71.
- 12 Ibid. 383.