

An Anglo-Saxon Will

Persona Pentathlon Category 1: Calligraphy
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What is this?

This is a transcription of a will, written between 1022 and 1043, left by a moderately wealthy thegn named Wulfsige. The text comes from “Anglo-Saxon Wills”, and is taken from Cambridge University Library MS FF. 2. 33, f. 50¹. I've changed the name to an abbreviated form of Wulfstan (“Wulfsige” was given in the original as “Wlsi”) and there's one mis-spelling, but it's otherwise a direct copy from Whitelock's book.

Whitelock's transcription and translation are available on the table for comparison.

Hey, you should have used the seal on this!

Interestingly, wills were never sealed. Charters and other legal documents of the time were sealed, meaning that a wax or leaden seal was applied to them. It didn't seal them shut, as we do with modern stationary, but attested that the document was genuine. It's thought that wills were primarily an oral statement of intent, and that the written words were an auxilliary record. The testimony of the witnesses to the will would have been the appropriate method of authentication, not a seal.²

What calligraphic hand is that?

It's supposed to be Insular Miniscule, following Marc Drogin's exemplar³. The cover of Whitelock's book (see book on table) shows it in use, as do other Anglo-Saxon legal documents of the time. Whitelock notes that the initial H is enlarged by enclosing it in brackets in her transcription. I've rendered it as an enlarged capital with serifs, as seen in other charters, such as the 11th cen. British Library Additional Charter 19795⁴, shown below.

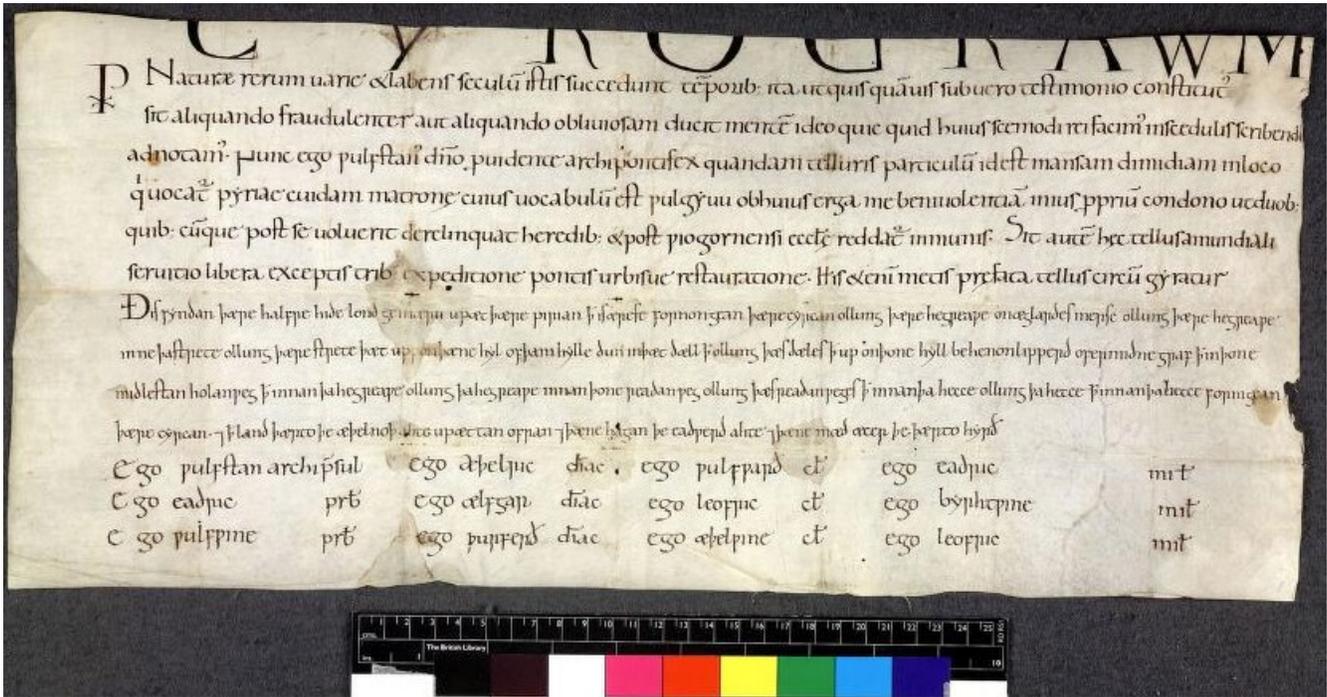


Figure 1: A charter for a lease of land, 1003 - 1023

The first section is in Latin, and written in insular majuscule. The second section is in vernacular Old English, using insular miniscule. The will I copied did not have a Latin section, and was entirely in Old English. Whitelock did not specify what hand was used for it, but insular miniscule seems likely.

Why is it so boring? And what's with the landscape layout?

As you can see in BL Additional Charter 19795, one-page legal documents of these types (charters, wills) were laid out on a single sheet (with a 'face' and 'dorse' rather than the folio's recto/verso). Layout seems to have prized maximizing writing surface over other considerations. The example on Whitelock's book cover has hardly any margins at all (although this may be the result of later trimming). Certainly they were not enriched with the illuminations that graced the holy books. (Even manuscripts of secular poetry did not have these – the Exeter book and the *Beowulf* manuscript have no more decoration than some enlarged and simply ornamented capitals.)

Method and Materials

The writing surface is Pergamenata in “antique” color. I couldn't quite justify the cost of parchment to myself, given my skill level. I used a compass and straight edge to mark writing lines and margins, and blind ruled them with a bone folder. You can see the blind ruling on BL Additional Charter 19795 using the website's zoom function.

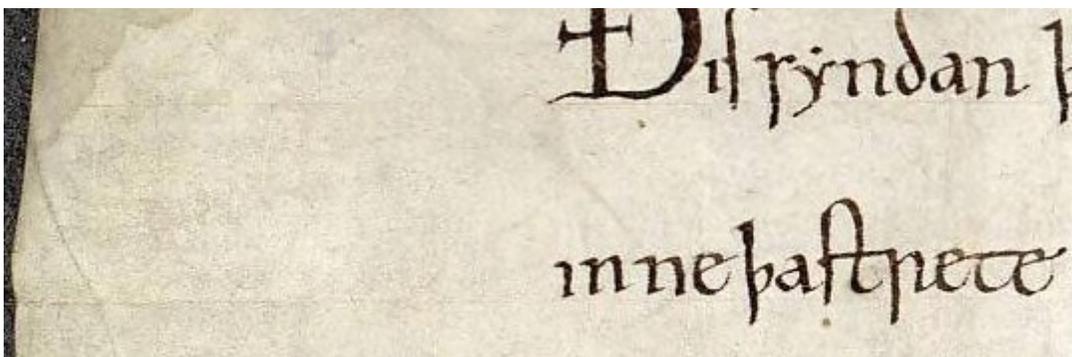


Figure 2: Blind ruling visible in a close-up of the charter. Let's hope my printer is up to the task of rendering it.

I think that a divider and pricker would have been more proper than a compass with lead. I pounced the surface with gum sandarac and tapped off the excess.

I used the goose quill I made for the enlarged initial capital and the first few words, then switched to a turkey quill that performed better. (See documentation on the quills for more detail.) I wrote using Blots Iron Gall ink, which claims to be made according to a 16th century recipe. I have read in many places that iron/oak gall ink is also appropriate for early period, but I don't have a reference for it. I had a small easel to prop the paper up at an angle for writing.

I pricked my pencil marks – unnecessary, but meant to give it the right 'look' – and then erased the pencil. I trimmed the sheet and the will was done.

Known Issues

I used the same small knife I used for the quills (see table display) to 'erase' some mistakes. I let one stand: “bryie” for “brinie.” I tried to scrape it off to correct it, but I seemed to be doing more harm than good. Not wanting to ruin the rest of the document, I let it be.

Whitlock provided some of the original Old English characters in her transcription, e.g., thorn (þ) and eth (ð). I believe I mistook the thorns for wynnns (ƿ), which are the pointy p-shapes you see in the work. They probably should be thorns, with ascenders.

On the other hand, I've learned in retrospect that all of Whitlock's “w”s should probably have been wynnns. I am not sure what to make of the one “v” in her transcription; I didn't think “v” was in use at this time, but I don't know what else she meant by it.

I made my best guesses on where to use the 'long s' form and the more modern form. Drogin says the modern 's' is, well, modern, but I'd swear I saw it in a manuscript at one point. However, no reference for it.

Descenders, particularly on F's and R's, should be pointed for this hand. I couldn't get the knack for it, and I just ended up with a wiggly descender every time I tried twisting the pen angle. Eventually, I stopped trying to make it happen.

Conclusions

I'm not a great calligrapher, but it was pretty neat to see the occasional letter form correctly. I need a lot

more practice.

Resources

¹Dorothy Whitelock, ed. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011, pp. 74-75, 185.

²*Ibid.*, pp. xxx – xxxi.

³Marc Drogin. *Medieval Calligraphy: Its history and technique*. Dover Books: New York, 1980, pp. 113-116.

⁴British Library Additional Charter 19795. Online at DigiPal,
<http://www.digipal.eu/digipal/manuscripts/5/pages/>