

The Medieval Library of Malmesbury Abbey

Anne Goodyer

Introduction

The medieval library of Malmesbury Abbey was dispersed and mostly lost following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. A small number of manuscripts do still exist, this paper examines the background to the library and investigates the story of the surviving documents.

Primary research source

The research is based on the Medieval Libraries of Great Britain web site (Oxford University 2019) which details the work carried out in 1941 by Neil Kerr for The Royal Historical Society Handbook. It describes the 29 texts that survive from Malmesbury Abbey listed in appendix 1. These cover a range of topics, some are based on the scriptures but many are classical patristic texts with historical and medical texts also included. Most are in Latin and most are on vellum. Where size is given they range from 24x16 cm to 37x25 cm. The whereabouts of 28 are known 8 are in the British Library, 7 in the Bodleian Oxford, 7 in Cambridge Colleges, 3 belong to Oxford colleges, 1 is in Lambeth Palace archive, 1 in Switzerland and 1 in US.

Identification and verification of manuscripts belonging to Malmesbury Abbey is not a precise science, there are many different views and conflicting opinions amongst academic researchers, their work is an on-going, and sometimes changing activity. In general very few early manuscripts can be assigned to a location (Lapidge 2005). A small number have an ex-libris inscription from a particular institution and others have scribal colophons showing who wrote them. Sometimes script similarities on palaeographical grounds can be assigned to a scriptorium at a particular date. However a text could have been copied and sent elsewhere or a scribe could have moved elsewhere.

Examples from the 29 manuscripts show that manuscript A3, image 1, has an ex-libris inscription from Malmesbury Abbey (Thomson 2003).

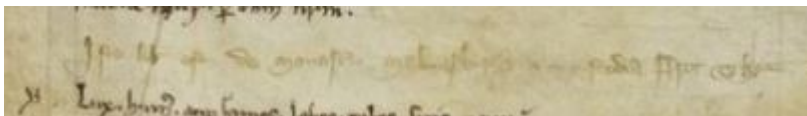


Image 1 A3 De cura pastorali – Corpus Christi College Cambridge

A24 is in the hand of William of Malmesbury (Thomson 2003).

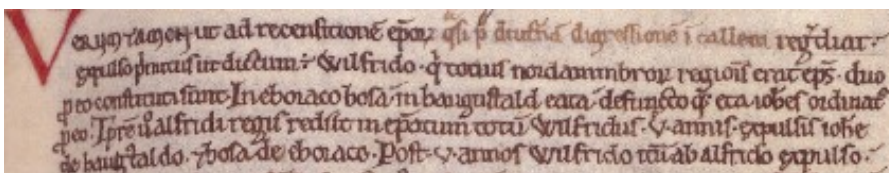


Image 2 A24 De gestis pontificum - Magdalen College Oxford

Early history of the library

There had been great libraries in antiquity e.g. Alexandria's library of c. 80,000 volumes, destroyed by the Romans c. 273 CE. The Romans carried several substantial libraries back to Rome, many of which were destroyed in the 6th century sacking by Goths. However when Pope Gregory's

missionaries reached England in 597 CE, there is evidence that he sent supporting texts (Lapidge 2005).

Aldhelm (c.639 to 709 CE) as a student recorded colleagues going to Rome and bringing back books. Their primary purpose was interpretation of scriptures supporting regulation of the church and there were sufficient books to put England in the vanguard of European learning at this time.

No pre-conquest book inventory survives but, from booklists, abbey libraries are likely to have been relatively small, with c.60 texts excluding liturgical books. It was unlikely that there was a library room, from literary sources books would have been stored in chests. Books also came and went, there is no evidence of library processes and they seemed to belong to a person (Thomson 1982). From the 7th century scriptoria were established to copy texts (Lapidge 2005).

From Aldhelm's own quotes c. 90 texts can be identified, including classical and late antiquity texts. Much research has been carried out to determine if any Malmesbury texts still exist from this time. One possibility is A11, *Instituta regularia divine legis* in the Cotton Collection of British Library (Lapidge 2005).



Image 3 A11 *Instituta regularia divine legis* - British Library London

In the 8th century Boniface was carrying out missionary work amongst the pagan Germans and asked supporters to send him books. Given that he was joined by Lull, Malmesbury Abbey books may have been taken to help his work.

By the 9th century and time of Alfred, libraries had declined and he bemoaned their state. After the defeat of Vikings in 878 CE and a likely fire in Malmesbury (Thomson 1982), Alfred set about restocking libraries and importing continental scholars and translated works. Later Athlestan gave many gifts to Malmesbury Abbey, these are likely to have included books and so the abbey library would have grown.

Malmesbury Abbey then had a chequered history, from 950 to 965 CE it became of college of secular clerks and in c.1050 there was a second great fire at Malmesbury. The 10th century then saw Benedictine Reform with the expulsion of secular clergy and replacement by monks with greater emphasis on learning from texts.

The Norman Era

William the Conqueror imposed church reform to remove "irregularities" of the Anglo Saxon church that had developed its own customs. Bishops and Abbots were replaced by Normans, at Malmesbury the most notable was Godfrey of Jumièges who became abbot in 1091, he found the library "disappointing". It was likely to have been dominated by vernacular texts and missing mainstream patristic texts, he set about to build a fine library fit for Malmesbury Abbey.

Under his tutelage was William of Malmesbury, born c.1095 who entered the abbey at a young age and became Godfrey's librarian. William was a great scholar he wrote original works, collected writings and books for the abbey church and made digests and collections of material for his own research. He was very well read, from his quotations 400 works by 200 authors can be identified.



Image 5 A17 Collection of Roman History copied by William and one of his scribes c. 1129 - Bodleian

Image 4 A1 Psychomachia - Cambridge Corpus Christi College

It is likely that Malmesbury did not have an organised scriptorium as over 50 different hands have been identified in the existing texts of very different quality (Thomson 2003). One document could have many different scribes involved, A16 has 9 scribes including William of Malmesbury. Libraries were now located in the cloisters with wooden cupboards fixed against the wall to store books. The number of books at Malmesbury is unknown but is likely to be several hundred based on the fact that Canterbury had 700 and Reading had 200. Of the manuscripts William would have known or produced 19 survive, these include those written by him, copied by him and used by him. They include images 4 and 5 above.

Medieval Malmesbury

Malmesbury continued to thrive through the medieval period with pilgrims coming to the shrine of Aldhelm. The library also grew, an example of a manuscript from this time is image 6, a history of world from earliest times to the present written by a monk of Malmesbury in the mid-14th century.

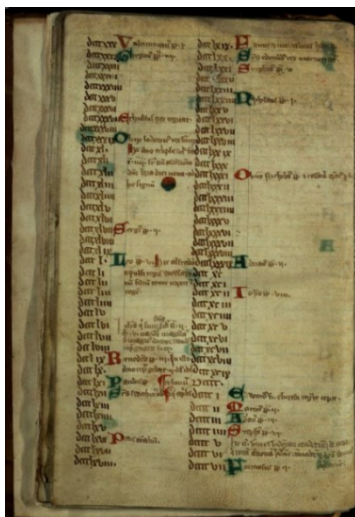


Image 6 A6 Eulogium Historiarum - Trinity College Cambridge

By the 15th century decline had started, the Black Death had reduced income, the crown had started to cease assets which resulted in a reduction in services provided and feelings of hostility against the abbey grew. In 1527 Abbott of Gloucester carried out a visitation and reported "sordidness and

neglect”, the abbey was in “sore decay” (Victoria County History 2019). It is interesting to speculate if the abbey had maintained its library at this point.

Dissolution of the monasteries

Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and abbeys for both financial and religious reasons (Wright 1951). The traditional view is that this act resulted in the destruction of the library of Malmesbury Abbey. Investigation shows that this is a simplistic view.

In 1535, prior to the dissolution, John Leland, a humanist scholar and avid collector of ancient manuscripts received a commission from Henry VIII via Thomas Cromwell to survey the monastic libraries of England. The aim was to find ancient English documents that supported Henry’s case for independence from Rome (Carley 2004). Leland started at Glastonbury and arrived at Malmesbury via Wells and Bath. He was recording ancient English texts but was also interested in any rare items, he also didn’t record anything he had already seen.

Malmesbury Abbey was in disarray in 1535 they had no Abbott. It was no longer a seat of learning and study but money was all important. He recorded 24 books from the Malmesbury library which are documented in appendix 2. In comparison he recorded 44 at Glastonbury which was of a similar size to Malmesbury (Carley 1986). Only 3 of the 24 can be identified from the list of 29 existing manuscripts today, one was the Junillus Africanus, A11 and B20.

Leland was also acquiring books for the Royal Collection and his own collection, one well documented example is Tertullian Manuscript B23 (Lapidge 2005). This was an early and very precious edition of works by Tertullian 155 – c. 240 CE, an early Christian author, interpreted as denying the absolute authority of the Roman pontiff. Leland removed it from Malmesbury Abbey perhaps to have it printed. There are many stories about where it went but it was most likely sent to Germany, the centre for printing. Letters exist from Leland asking for its return but he never saw it again. It may have passed to John Clement, scholar and friend of Leland. As a prominent Catholic Clement fled Britain to Belgium in reign of Elizabeth I and his collection was destroyed by the Spanish in 1572 in the Eighty Years War. The Tertullian manuscript was never heard of again, it had survived the Dissolution of the Monasteries to be destroyed by Continental conflict (Carley 2004).

On 15th December 1539 Malmesbury Abbey was surrendered to the care of the dissolution commissioner Sir Edward Baynton. The Abbey buildings no longer required were placed in hands of Baynton’s deputy, William Stumpe, this included the cloisters, chapter house and dining room. Abbey jewels were reserved for the King including mitres garnished with silver (Bartholomew 2017). There is no mention of the library during this period, did some of the manuscripts go with the jewels? William Stumpe was a shrewd businessman he would have known the value of some of the manuscripts it is unlikely he let them be destroyed. Did he find buyers?

There were reports by 1549 (Wright 1951) that manuscripts were being used to scour candlesticks and rub boots. In particular they were used as binding strips for other books, a practice in place before the dissolution. The loss taking place was recognised by Elizabethan collectors.

Antiquarian collectors

From the late 15th century renaissance ideas had started to grow in England and with this interest in Book Collecting, particularly ancient texts. There is at least one documented example, Canones Conciliorum A26, of one of the 29 surviving Malmesbury manuscripts being donated to an Oxford College in 1459. This raises the question, had the monks of Malmesbury started to sell the contents of their library when money became a problem?

A number of collectors looked to save what was left (Wright 1951). The most prominent collectors include:

Robert Cotton 1571-1631, MP and advisor to James I, obtained manuscripts from collections including those of John Leland. His grandson transferred the collection to the nation in 1702, forming the foundation of the newly established British Museum and hence British Library. In October 1731 a

fire at Ashburnham House where the collection was stored destroyed some volumes and badly damaged many others.

6 items from Malmesbury Abbey are in the Cotton Collection, A8 to A13. Vitae sanctorum A13 was damaged in the fire. (British Library 2019).

Matthew Parker, chaplain to Anne Boleyn, Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University and Archbishop of Canterbury. An avid book collector salvaging many manuscripts dispersed by dissolution of the monasteries, particularly those relating to Anglo Saxon England with evidence of the ancient English speaking church, independent of Rome (Corpus Christi College 2019). His collection is in Corpus Christi College Cambridge, it contains 3 of Malmesbury's manuscripts A1,A2 and A3 with another 2 "possibles".

Robert Harley's collection of 7,000 manuscripts was sold to nation in 1753. It contains one Malmesbury document A14, he bought the collection of Sir Simond d'Ewes, an antiquarian encouraged by Robert Cotton. (British Library 2019).

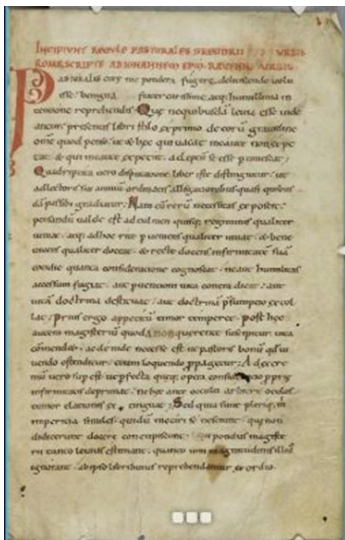


Image 7 De cura pastoralis A3 – Parker Collection
Corpus Christi College Cambridge



Image 8 Articella A14 – Harley Collection British Library

Other evidence

John Aubrey English antiquary and writer, visited Rev. William Stump, great grandson of William who bought the abbey in 1633 and recorded. "He was a proper man and a good fellow ; and, when he brewed a barrell of speciall ale, his use was to stop the bung- hole, under the clay, with a sheet of manuscript ; he sayd in my grandfather's dayes the manuscripts flew about like butterflies. All musick bookes, account bookes, copie bookes, etc, were covered in old manuscripts and the gloves at Malmesbury wrapt up no doubt in many good pieces of antiquity." (Aubrey 1668).

A sad tale of the fate of many of the Malmesbury Abbey manuscripts.

Other possible manuscripts

Appendix 3 shows 5 other manuscripts which may have been part of the Malmesbury Abbey library. Two are firmly on the list of Thomson, 2003 and it is unclear why they are not on the Ker list. The Parker archive identify two manuscripts from their collection as from Malmesbury, they appear on the Leland list appendix 2 but lack full evidence of provenance.

The final manuscript is the magnificent Junius 11 whose provenance is the source of much debate. Known as the Cædmon Manuscript it has parts of Genesis, Exodus and Daniel in Old English verse, illustrated with Anglo-Saxon drawings, c. 1000 CE. Evidence of links with Malmesbury are that the artist appears to be the same as A1 Psychomachia and the images match those carved on the south porch of Malmesbury Abbey.



Image 9 Cædmon Manuscript – Bodleian Library

A23 is a cartulary, these contain copies of charters and related documents, supplying evidence of landholding, legal transactions and day-to-day business. As such they would not have been part of the medieval library in the same way as the texts discussed. Approximately 2,000 medieval cartularies have survived from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, dating from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. Cartularies from Malmesbury Abbey, other than A23, survive in the National Archive (National Archive 2020).

Conclusion

The picture is much more complicated than William Stumpe allowing the library of Malmesbury Abbey to be destroyed as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries. Research is on-going into the remaining medieval texts and experts will continue to have differing views as new evidence emerges. Outside of the 29 existing Malmesbury manuscripts more could be awaiting verification, the five identified are certainly candidate.

Malmesbury History Society Project

A project was set up in 2017 by Malmesbury History Society to create an online virtual library of the surviving medieval manuscripts from Malmesbury Abbey. This is available at <http://www.malmesburyhistorysociety.org.uk/library>. Information already in the public domain is collated for each manuscript and where copyright has been obtained an image of pages from each manuscript is included. This work is ongoing as permissions are received and any additional manuscripts are identified.

Appendix 1			
List of 29 surviving manuscripts from Malmesbury Abbey as in http://mlgb3.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/			
Cambridge Corpus Christi College	A1	Psychomachia 'Battle of the Soul' by Prudentius is the first fully allegorical work in the European literary tradition. It describes the battle between the vices and virtues for the Christian soul.	11 th century
	A2	De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii "On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury" by the fifth-century author Martianus Capella is an influential commentary on the liberal arts.	11 th -12 th century
	A3	De cura pastorali. Written by Gregory the Great, Pastoral Care is from the branch of the textual tradition which is closest to that used in King Alfred the Great's translation.	11 th century
Cambridge Trinity College	A4	Evangelium S. Lucae St. Luke's Gospels translated by John Scotus Erigena. He is generally recognized to be both the outstanding philosopher of the Carolingian era.	12 th century
	A5	Gesta Pontificum Anglorum "Deeds of the Bishops of the English", an ecclesiastical history of England written by William of Malmesbury covering the period from the arrival of St Augustine in AD 597 until the time it was written.	12 th century
	A6	Eulogium Historiarum A universal chronicle from the Creation to 1366 in Latin prose, drawn from various sources, some listed in a poem; probably written by a monk at Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire	14 th century
Cambridge University Library	A7	Defloratio Gregorii Collection of works from Gregory in hand of William of Malmesbury	12 th century
British Library London	A8	Genealogia regum Anglorum Genealogy of the Kings of the English by Aelred of Rievaulx	14 th century
	A9	Gospels Leaf of gospel book below	11 th century
	A10	Gospels Imperfect Gospel-book, written in Old English copied in the 1st half of the 11th century. In the mid-11th century, an Old English translation of a bull of Pope Sergius which benefitted Malmesbury Abbey was added between the Gospels of St Luke and St John.	11 th century
	A11	Instituta regularia divine legis By Junillus Africanus, Quaestor of the Sacred Palace in the court of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I. Explains how Byzantium accommodated Roman law as Roman and Christian theories converged.	7 th -8 th century
	A12	De abbatibus Malmesburiensibus Badly damaged	12 th – 13 th century
	A13	Vita Sanctorum Part of A20 in Bodleian Library. Badly damaged in the fire of 1731	11 th century
	A14	Articella Compilation of medical texts of Greek, Byzantine, and Arabic origin.	14 th century
	A15	Johannes Scotus Formerly part of Trinity College Cambridge's Evangelium S. Lucae A4 above	12 th century
Lambeth Palace Library	A16	Anselmus, opera The works of St Anselm an Italian Benedictine monk. Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109 and famed as the originator of the ontological	12 th -13 th century

London		argument for the existence of God.	
Bodleian Library Oxford	A17	Miscellanea historica et iuristica Historical and legal texts, collected by William of Malmesbury. Includes collection of Roman history.	12 th century
	A18	De natura rerum Computistical texts including those by Isidore and Robert of Hereford. List of books in the handwriting of William of Malmesbury.	12 th century
	A19	Policraticus Political science written by John of Salisbury	12 th century
	A20	Vite sanctorum Life of Saints lives written in Jumieges.	11 th century
	A21	Interpretatio nominum Hebraicorum "Interpretations" (translations) of the proper names of the Bible. Philo Judicus the original author was a first century Alexandrian theologian.	9 th century
	A22	Cicero, Partitiones Oratoriae etc "The Divisions of Oratory" a brief essay on the art of oratory, designed for the instruction of Cicero's son Marcus Tullius	12 th century
	A23	Cartularium; Alcuinus, Questiones super Genesium A register of Malmesbury Abbey	13 th century
Magdalen College Oxford	A24	De gestis pontificum Deeds of the Bishops of the English", an ecclesiastical history of England written by William of Malmesbury	12 th century
Merton College Oxford	A25	Beda A collection of ancient and contemporary commentaries on the Old Testament Wisdom books, was made c. 1125 by monks of Malmesbury abbey for William of Malmesbury	12 th century
Oriel College Oxford	A26	Canones conciliorum etc Rules of the Council in the hand of William of Malmesbury	12 th century
Saint Gallen Switzerland	A27	Psalterium Book of Psalms with liturgical calendar and litany of the Saints	14 th century
Untraced	A28	Ezechiel Book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible	12 th century
Urbana Univ. US	A29	Sylloge Inscriptorium Compilation of inscriptions put together for Bishop Mildred of Worcester	10 th century

Appendix 2	
List of manuscripts seen at Malmesbury Abbey by John Leland in 1535	
B.1 Iuencus, C. Vettius Aquilinus	Euangelia metrica
B.2 Venantius Fortunatus [after 600], bishop of Poitiers	Carmina
B3 William of Malmesbury [c1080-1143]	De serie quatuor euangelistarum uario carminis genere libri XV not known to survive.
B4 Venantius Fortunatus [after 600], bishop of Poitiers	Vita S. Paterni
B5:William of Malmesbury [c1080-1143]	Commentary on Lamentations
B6 William of Malmesbury [c1080-1143]	Vita S. Aldhelmi
B7 Faricius of Malmesbury OSB [1117], abbot of Abingdon	Vita S. Aldhelmi
B8 Bede the Venerable [c673-735], monk of Wearmouth-Jarrow	Commentary on the Prayer of Habakkuk
B9a (Leviticus): Bede the Venerable [c673-735], monk of Wearmouth-Jarrow	Commentary on Exodus—Deuteronomy
B9b Bede the Venerable [c673-735], monk of Wearmouth-Jarrow	Commentary on Tobit
B10 Claudius Taurinensis [after 827], bishop of Turin	Commentary on Matthew preface only
B11 Sextus the Pythagorean [?2nd cent.]	Sententiae, tr. Rufinus
B12 Alcuin [c735-804]	Quaestiones in Genesim
B13 ('interprete Ioanne Scoto'): Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite	Opera, Latin
B14 Cassiodorus Senator [c485-580]	De anima
B15 Basil of Caesarea [c330-379], bishop of Caesarea	Hexaameron, tr. Eustathius
B16 Gregory of Nyssa [c395]	De opificio hominis, tr. Dionysius Exiguus
B17 Robert of Cricklade [after 1188]	Speculum fidei unpr. Leland
B18 Alcuin [c735-804]	Commentary on Ecclesiastes
B19 Petrus Grossolanus [†1117], archbishop of Milan	De processione Spiritus Sancti
B20 Iunillus Africanus ('Junilius') [548/9]	Instituta regularia diuinae legis
B21 L. Apuleius [c123-after 161]	Liber peri hermeneias
B22 Eutyches [6th cent.]	Ars de uerbo
B23 Tertullian [† c220]	De ieiunio, De spectaculis, and other works
B24 Alcuin [c735-804]	Epistolae

Appendix 3		
Manuscripts which may have belonged to Malmesbury Abbey		
Lincoln College Oxford	MS lat 100 Texts by Frontinus, Vegetius, Eutropius (Thomson). Corrections in the hand of William of Malmesbury	12 th century
British Library	Royal 5 F IV Collection of texts by Ambrose (Thomson)	12 th century
Cambridge Corpus Christi College	Euangelia metrica, a metrical paraphrase of the gospels in Virgilian language composed in the fourth century by aristocratic Spanish priest, Juvencus. Leland	7 th century
	Speculum fidei unique copy of work of Robert of Cricklade in the form of a commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (c. 1095-1160).	12 th century
Bodleian Library Oxford	Junius 11 'The Cædmon Manuscript': parts of Genesis, Exodus and Daniel in Old English verse, illustrated with Anglo-Saxon drawings, c. A.D. 1000.	1000

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Cambridge Corpus Christi College

<https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/nz663nv2057>

Cambridge Trinity College

<http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=1581>

Oxford Magdalen College

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