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Introduction

Library Services at City, University of London undertook an appraisal last year of their archive and special collections for the first time in several years. The archive and special collections own many gems – a complete and annotated collection of the influential literary and critical journal *The Athenaeum*, several rare books relating to science and engineering, and items relating to the institution's prestigious history. During the process, however, while they were developing methodologies for appraising archival material the team discovered a previously unknown late medieval manuscript.

Background

During summer vacation 2016, a team of Library Services staff undertook an auditing project to examine and review the archive and special collections. This was the first step in a multi-stage project to rehouse the archive and special collections, make them discoverable and open them up to researchers.

The archive and special collections have had an uneven history in terms of collection and stewardship. Several of the earlier items in the archive were working papers for the establishment and governance of City. Of these, the most interesting are the paperwork covering City's transition into a university in 1966. In the late 1960s and 1970s the university librarians P. R. Lewis and S. J. Teague actively acquired several collections associated with various individuals who were linked either with the university or with the subjects taught here. As the collections grew, an active collection policy seems to have been established.

In the later seventies and early eighties the archive was catalogued by the recently retired university librarian S. J. Teague. An active man in his retirement, Teague also found time to act as honorary librarian for the London collection (housed within the library space) and to write a history of the university. In the 1980s several of the special collections were catalogued, but not all. Teague, for example, catalogued the Walter Fincham optics collection, which includes several early printed books relating to ophthalmology and science.

As the university grew to become the preeminent education provider for business and the professions, the library came under intense space pressure. During the appraisal process several key documents came to light outlining the donations of several collections in the 1990s. It is clear from this documentation that the library sought to identify institutions better placed to make the collections public; however, the key motive behind this was lack of space. No auditing documentation was found dating from this period, but it has to be presumed that the remaining collections were considered to have some relevance to the library and were kept for this reason.

From this date onwards, the archive and special collections were overseen by the inter-library loans team. They worked on the day-to-day tasks and responded to enquiries but did not have the resources to undertake an archival-level management of the collections. In 2016, the new Director of Library Services dedicated resources to reappraise the City archive and special collections. A project group was formed to oversee the archive and special collection. The group are not trained archivists, but they do have specialist skills and knowledge well suited to auditing a historically valuable collection, including rare book and manuscript experience. Training was also undertaken in key areas to support the work the group does.

Appraisal

Prior to the appraisal project in 2016 the extent, provenance and content of some collections in the City archive and special collections were unknown. Some print-based archival descriptions, lists and provenance information had

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been recorded, but these were by no means comprehensive. The appraisal process naturally had to begin by listing our collections, identifying our holdings and consulting any related paperwork (such as accession documents) in the archive in an attempt to uncover any records relating to the original deposit and its provenance. Inevitably this was easier for governance information, and harder for some collections and bequests. Following the appraisal the archive was moved from its temporary home to a more secure space which better meets preservation requirements. This all had to be completed in the relatively short timescale of the summer vacation and worked around the group's library day jobs.

At the start of the project, the group discussed the methodology for appraising the collections. Using a scorecard system, several key categories were identified. The most important were whether the collections had direct links to the university and the subjects it taught, the value of the collection to researchers and the impact of moving it to another location. The latter two categories were hard to measure as many of the collections were not publicly discoverable.

The rare books collection is part of the special collections held by the university. It contains both rare books in the technical sense (books printed 1500–1800) and rare books in the more general sense; alongside scientific texts from the seventeenth century stood paperbacks from the Left Book Club and Penguin Film Reviews. It is clear from stamp marks that several items in this collection were old library books, withdrawn from the main stock and retained on account of their age or rarity.

The manuscript was one of the items found here. Because it was hidden in a modern binding in the middle of the rare books collection, it was not obvious as one looked at the shelves that this 'book' was in fact a manuscript. As the rare books collection is not catalogued, there was no record or knowledge that this item existed prior to the audit.

The manuscript

The manuscript measures 18 x 12 cm and contains ten pages. It contains two texts – the 'Algorismus' (or 'De arte numerandi') and the 'De anni ratione' – written by Johannes de Sacrobosco (also known as John of Holywood or John of Halifax). The 'Algorismus' was the first major text of the Western tradition that dealt with and examined the use of Hindu–Arabic numerals. It became a key text of the medieval European university curriculum. Before this date, roman numerals were used. Hindu–Arabic numerals allowed a major advance in mathematics and made possible developments like mathematic calculation of physical properties, double entry bookkeeping and the Dewey decimal classification. The 'De anni ratione' is a criticism of the Julian calendar, which had been introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE. Due to the complexity of calculating when to add intercalary days, the Julian calendar was prone to error. Sacrobosco was influenced by medieval Arabic astronomy. His theory – to take a day out every 288 years – was later largely discredited, probably because he did not have access to more accurate astronomic data.

The Julian calendar was replaced by the Gregorian calendar, country by country, in a slow process over a period of some 350 years, from 1582 to 1923. The changes did not take place in Great Britain until 1751–2. Both texts were very popular in the medieval and early modern period, which means that copies of the text were not uncommon.

After a brief examination of the manuscript the archive group sought professional advice from the British Library. Justin Clegg, Special Collections Reference Manager, identified the date and provenance of the manuscript from the handwriting. He advised a date of late-fifteenth century and suggested that it was likely to be from a university setting.

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Figure 1 The calendar

Both texts are in Latin as relatively few works were written in the vernacular in the medieval West. Sacrobosco worked in the University of Paris in the twelfth century. This was one of Europe's premier universities and attracted students from many different countries. Latin was used as a scholarly lingua franca. The decline of Latin for scholarly purposes was very gradual – both Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* published in 1543 and Newton's *Principia* (1687) were written in Latin, which would have meant that both texts could cross linguistic boundaries in Western countries.

Throughout the text the scribe of the manuscript used abbreviations. This allowed more text to be written on less parchment and made the manuscript cheaper to produce, and hence to buy. The abbreviations followed standard practice of the medieval period in various languages. The first word of the text, 'Compotus', has been abbreviated to Compot with a superscript symbol (looking like a backward 'c' or an exaggerated apostrophe) to represent the final letters 'us'. First letters of initial words (the rubric) are written in red ink in order to make them stand out (see Fig. 2).

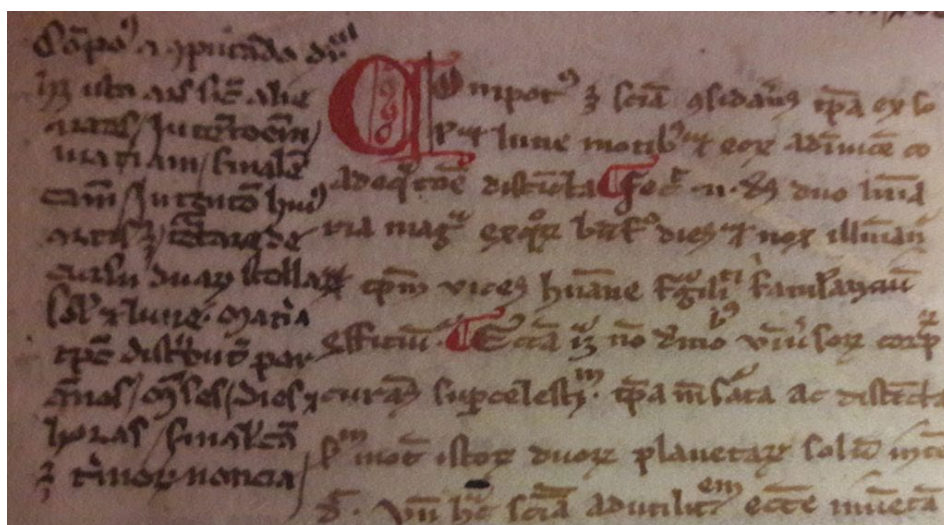


Figure 2 Rubric and marginalia

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There is evidence of two different styles of handwriting (or 'hands') – one in black and red and the other in a brown ink (Fig. 2). The brown ink seems to be written around the black text and may be the notes of the first reader. This kind of writing (or 'marginalia') can be very valuable to historians when reconstructing the *Weltanschauung* (or worldview) of a medieval university.

At the side of the manuscript you can see several regularly placed holes (prickings) (see Fig. 3) which would have been made by a copyist, or, more often, the copyist's apprentice. The copyist could then draw lines across the page to help them write neatly.

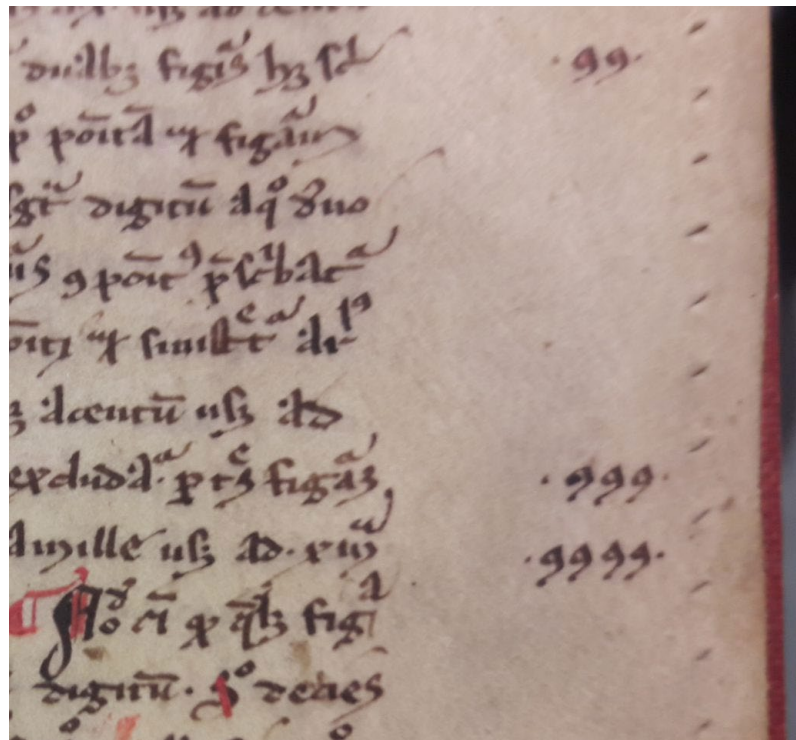


Figure 3 Prickings

Manuscripts are notoriously easy prey to parasites and this one contains several holes. The word 'bookworm' originally referred to insects that bored through pages of the book, and you can sometimes trace their routes through books. Holes that appear after the creation of a manuscript are called *lacunae*, a term that is also sometimes used for gaps in text or missing words. If you look closely at the hole in Fig. 4, however, you will notice two very interesting things. First, the text has been written around the hole, and secondly the holes show signs of repair. These holes are not *lacunae*, but were in existence when the manuscript was written, the reason for this being that during the preparation of parchment the skin of the animal was dried and stretched. Any minuscule holes in the animal's skin at the time of death would stretch in size. Equally, a heavy-handed parchment maker could cause damage during production. The older the animal, the more holes the parchment would be likely to show. Expensive manuscripts would often use younger animals. Vellum, the luxury writing material of the medieval period, was prepared from calf's skin.

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Figure 4 Hole in manuscript

Conclusion

Alongside the excitement, this discovery also reminded the team members of the importance of record-keeping. This manuscript was obviously a known collection item at some point, and given its value it is surprising that we do not possess any records of its provenance or accession into the special collections. Our auditing exercise means that we now have rigorous accession processes and a written collection policy for the archive. The appraisals project also means that we are now in a stronger position to move forward with further projects. From ancient to modern, our next steps are a photo digitisation project. We are also planning more activities to use the archival materials to support research and teaching in the university.

Given its small size and relatively cheap manufacture, the manuscript is likely to have been the edition used by a university teacher or even student. It is exciting then to have found it almost by accident over 500 years later in a university library collection. Much has changed since the days when this manuscript was first copied, but the abiding value of manuscripts, books, international scholarly communication and the transmission of knowledge across borders remains of the utmost importance today.

Further reading

Teague, S. John (1980), *The City University*, London: The City University Press [online]. Available from: <http://www.city.ac.uk/about/facts-and-achievements/our-history/books-about-our-history> [accessed 11 July 2017]

If you'd like search the archives collections of City, look at our Aim 25 record: AIM 25 (n.d.), City University Archives [online]. Available from: <http://www.aim25.com/cats/43/3052.htm> [accessed 11 July 2017]

More detailed information about our collections and how to access them can be found on our library guide: City, University of London Library Services (2017), Archive and Special Collections [online]. Available from: <http://libguides.city.ac.uk/archives> [accessed 11 July 2017]

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