M.B. Parkes

Their Hands Before Our Eyes

A Closer Look at Scribes

The Lyell Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford 1999
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'whereby we might see in what manner the hand directed the pen in forming the letters'
Humfrey Wanley (1698)

M.B. PARKES
University of Oxford, UK

ASHGATE
Select Glossary of Technical Terms
Applied to Handwriting

Approach stroke: that which records the initial movement of the pen into an essential stroke in the construction of a letter form (see also auxiliary elements).

Archetypal: the system whereby graphic signs in contrastive distribution function within a complex of conventions to communicate language in a visible form.

Ascender: that essential element of the letters b d f h k l and long-s which extends above the minim height.

Aspect: the general impression on the page made by a specimen of handwriting at first sight (cf. equilibrium).

Auxiliary elements: those strokes (especially approach and transitional strokes) which record all or part of those movements of the pen that enabled a scribe to manoeuvre it into the appropriate positions to trace strokes forming the essential or subsidiary elements of a letter, or to make the transition from one letter to another.

Basic ductus: see ductus.

Biting (Bogenverbindung): the coalescence of two contrary curves in adjacent letters that follow b, round-backed d h o and p, originally adopted as a space-saving device during the twelfth century, but exploited as a feature of style in formal handwriting in the following centuries.

Calligraphy: the exploitation of the potential of penmanship to produce conspicuous features of style in response to a prevailing attitude towards what constituted elegance in handwriting.

Chiaroscuro effect (light-and-shade): the overall visual impression on the page generated by the contrast of the graphic patterns of letters against the background of the writing surface. The density of the patterns is determined by the combination of features, which include: the nib-width and its ratio to the minim height, the constant pen-angle, the colour of the ink, the space
within and between letters, the space between words, and the module of the handwriting.

**Common mark of abbreviation:** a stroke placed above a word, usually to indicate the omission of m or n, or a syllable not indicated by a *nota*.

**Compatible strokes:** for example, the two complementary strokes curved in opposite directions (anti-clockwise and clockwise) used to form the letter o in *set hands*.

**Components of a letter:** see letter shapes.

**Configuration:** the combination of *traces* required to construct the form of a letter.

**Conjoint letters:** the combination of the two compressed forms when the same letter is duplicated within a word; for example, bb, ll, pp, ff traced with a single crossbar and tt traced with a single headstroke (contrast *biting* and *ligature*).

**Constant pen-angle (defined in relation to a horizontal level above the line of writing):** determined by the angles at which a scribe cut the nib and held the pen. The angle is recorded in the direction of the broadest strokes, and the opposite direction (at a right angle) of the hairline strokes formed with the edge of the nib. Different pen-angles produce different profiles of letter shapes.

**Corresponding strokes:** those which record repetitive *movements* of the pen (for example, that forming the lobes of b p, and, sometimes, the second stroke of o, or that forming the stems of c and e, the first stroke of o and the lobes of d and q).

**Cues for legibility:** those minimum distinctive features required to identify letter shapes, which are located at the same level as the top segment of the letter x (referred to as cue-height).

**Cursive handwriting:** rapid handwriting, protean by nature, in which letter shapes are recognizable but not invariable because of the priority given to speed and ease of movement (see *cursive resolution*, and contrast *set hand*).

**Cursive resolution:** a general tendency in rapid handwriting produced with a pen to reduce the number and complexity of the *traces* by accelerating the *movements* of the pen, and lifting it from the writing surface as seldom as possible, thus modifying or transforming the letter forms.

**Curvature:** the extent by which curved *strokes* (for example, those forming the letter o and the lobes of letters) deviate from the major axis of the ellipse described
by the entire movement of the pen (see also compatible strokes, corresponding strokes).

**Decorum:**

the ground of common consent between contemporary scribes and readers as to the qualities of handwriting required for different kinds of texts, and to the appropriate balance (cf. equilibrium) between style and function within the limits of prevailing fashion.

**Descender:**

that element of the letters f p q r long-s and y, the stem and tail of g, the second stroke of x, and the limb of h, which extends below the base of the minim.

**Display script:**

a formal script adopted for a special book, but more frequently to indicate major divisions of a text in any book. Scribes often distinguished between a ‘primary’ display script for major headings, a ‘secondary’ display script for the opening words of a text, chapter or paragraph, and a ‘tertiary’ display script for the beginnings of sententiae or periods (in prose) and the beginning of a verse in poetical texts (see also hierarchy of scripts, litterae notabiliiores).

**Distinctions:**

the term applied to the Insular Minuscule forms of a d e f g h r and s, which appear in books copied in English Caroline Minuscule from the late tenth to the early thirteenth centuries.

**Ductus:**

the act of tracing strokes on the writing surface. A basic ductus determined the order and direction of the traces in the configurations required for the basic shapes of the letters in a particular script (see letter form, letter shape). A personal ductus determined the ways in which a scribe executed the traces of a basic ductus.

**Elements:**

of letter shapes, see auxiliary elements, essential elements, letter form, letter shape and subsidiary elements; of style, see graphic ideas, resources of style.

**Equilibrium:**

the impression created by the overall balance between style and function in the visual impact of a scribe’s handwriting. This impression depends on various factors including the coordination of traces, a balance between fluency and the requirements of a set hand within the stable rhythms of a scribe’s personal ductus, and upon the propriety of the handwriting according to prevailing attitudes to decorum.
Essential elements: those characteristics of a letter shape, which enable a reader to distinguish one letter from another (see also cues for legibility, letter shape).

Finishing stroke: the final stroke in the configuration of a letter form (for example, the ‘tongue’ of e, the stroke at the top right of the lobe of g), see also transitional strokes.

Graphic ideas: for example, the choice of module, ratio of nib-width to minim height, variant forms borrowed from different scripts and, especially, the exploitation of particular elements or resources of style to embellish components of letter shapes, in order to enhance the image of a scribe’s handwriting on the page.

Hierarchy of scripts: the ranking by scribes of scripts for display purposes (see display script), or according to their perception of the status of the text for which they were used (for example, the contrast between a script used for psalters or books of hours and that used for a commentary produced for the schools). Scribes also perceived a hierarchy in the different varieties of a single script.

Juncture: the point at which one stroke was joined to another when constructing a letter form.

Letter form: the configuration of traces required to construct a particular letter shape.

Letter shape: that which embodies the characteristics, or essential elements, which enable a reader to distinguish one letter from another in the alphabet of a particular script. Components of letter shapes are frequently described here in metaphorical terms (for example, ‘arches’ of m and n; ‘headstrokes’ of f, long-s and t; ‘lobes’ of b d g p and q; ‘tail’ of g; ‘tongue’ of e). (See ascender, cues for legibility, descender, ligature, minim, subsidiary elements.)

Ligature: there are two categories: (a) when two adjacent letter forms have been disarticulated, and their elements reassembled to create a single form: for example, e and t to produce the form &; (b) when two adjacent letters have been linked, and one has been modified in the process, whilst retaining its recognizable basic shape, for example in the ligatures ct and st.

Litterae notabiliores: ‘more noticeable letters’ (a late-medieval term) from a display script (q.v.) used to indicate the beginning of a new paragraph, sententia, or period (‘tertiary’ display). The term is used here to avoid
possible confusion created by the term ‘ Capitals’, which refers to two specific scripts from antiquity which were used in the middle ages.

**Major axis:**
the transverse axis between the two foci of an ellipse.

**Minim:**
the simplest stroke: used to form the letter i and in the construction of m n and u.

**Minusstyle:**
a category of script in which certain letter shapes were constructed with ascenders and descenders.

**Module:**
the distance between the base of the minim strokes on one line and the base of the minim strokes on the next line. Some scribes wrote on a ruled line, but many scribes wrote between the ruled lines, using them as a principal guide for the two levels of the handwriting.

**Movements (of the pen):**
those required for tracing the configurations of letter forms, although in a set hand the whole movement was usually not recorded on the writing surface, since a scribe lifted the pen.

**Nib-width:**
scribes seem to have preferred a narrow nib for small or rapid handwriting, and a broader nib for a set hand. The width of the cut nib was apparently used as a measure when deciding an appropriate height for the letters, since the heights of minim strokes or ascenders frequently correspond to a specific number of nib-widths. The boldness of strokes (and hence the overall chiaroscuro effect) depends on the ratio of nib-widths to minim height.

**Nota:**
an abbreviation symbol to indicate a word (as in ÷ for est) or a syllable (as in 9 for con-).

**Personal idiom:**
a combination of features which characterizes the handwriting of an individual scribe: a combination of personal ductus and especially a distinctive rhythm, a preference for particular variant letter forms and graphic ideas, and a distinctive response to prevailing decorum.

**Profile:**
the outline of a letter, and the contours of the strokes within it, created by the constant pen-angle and nib-width adopted by the scribe.

**Resources of style:**
the principal elements of style were strokes produced by formalized prototype cursive movements, often reduced in size, and which could be incorporated into the configurations of traces in a set hand to embellish details in the components of a letter shape. Scribes also borrowed features of style
from other contemporary scripts, or, in archaizing hands, from earlier scripts.

**Script:**

an alphabet regarded by many contemporary scribes as a suitable model, or, more frequently, a precedent, which each scribe had in his mind’s eye when he produced his own rendering of it on the page.

**Scriptio continua:**

copying a text without separating words.

**Serif:**
a short stroke at the top of an ascender, and at the base of a minim stroke, which helps to keep the eyes of a reader from slipping accidentally from one line to the next. Sometimes an ascender was traced with a double broken stroke producing a wedge-shaped feature in which the horizontal movement at the top of the ascender functioned as a serif.

**Set hand:**

handwriting in which the scribe lifted the pen before tracing each stroke.

**Slope in handwriting:**

(a) when a scribe was writing rapidly letters could develop a slope from top right to bottom left; (b) letters sloping from top left to bottom right are indicative of the angle of the page on the desk.

**Stroke:**

a record on the writing surface created by a single trace.

**Subsidiary elements:**

features above or below the cue-height which have a supplementary function to enable a reader to read more quickly. For example, ascenders were supplied with serifs, or with strokes to produce a wedge-shape, a fork or hook, or a loop, which emphasize the top boundary of a line of writing, and carry the eye of the reader downwards towards the level of the cue-height. Elaborate treatment of final minims assists a reader to distinguish between m and n.

**Trace:**

the movement of the pen which produced a stroke on the writing surface.
Transitional strokes: curved or diagonal finishing strokes which touch or connect to the following letter (especially those at the feet of i l and t, and the stroke added at the top right of the lobe of g) without forming a ligature, all of which contribute to consistent spacing between letters.

'Fratres scorteresque legite diligentem et intelligite verba huius libri'