

www.justmote.me/historyannotation

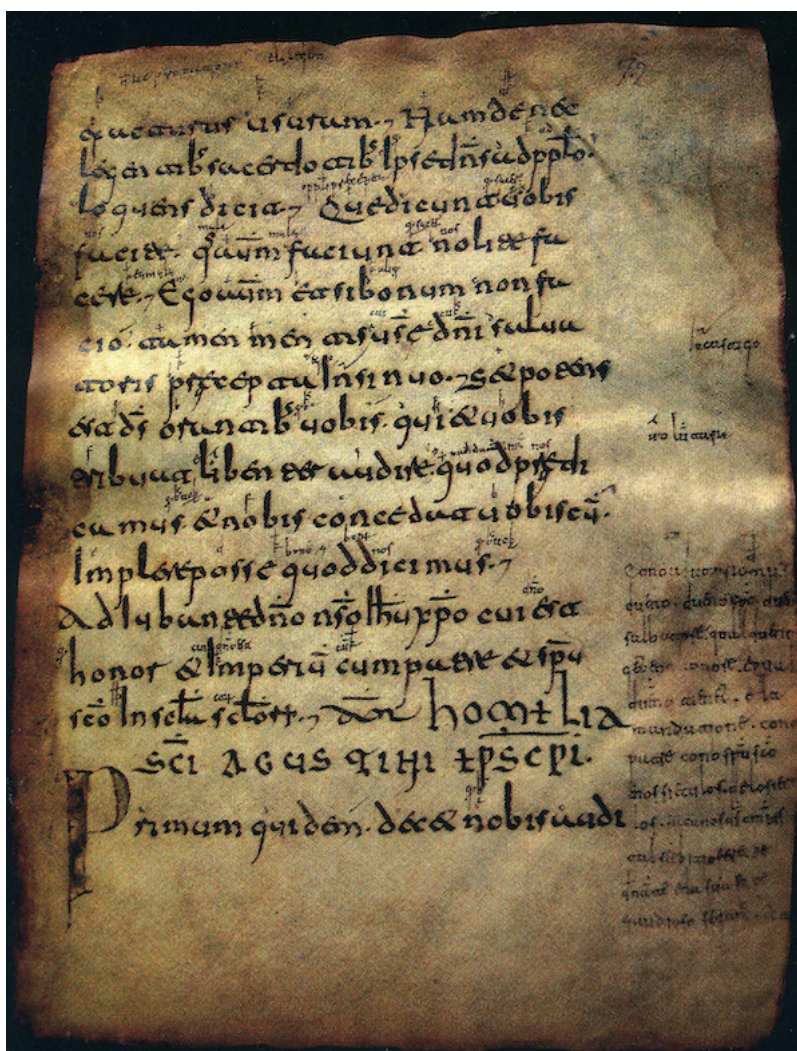
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4-5 minutes

Annotating for community: to 1500 AD

People have been annotating books for almost as long as books have been around. At a time when books were hand-written, rare and shared, these early annotations were provided primarily as a valued service for other readers, maybe the earliest form of mobile, social media.

Margin notes written around 1000 AD by a monk in Northern Spain are thought to contain the earliest known written examples of the Spanish language. These kinds of margin notes are known as glosses, and most typically would translate or clarify the meaning of a word or words in the text. Today, we use the word glossary to describe the appendix of a paper or book which functions as a collection of glosses, explaining key terms or names used in the text.



The Glosas Emilianenses

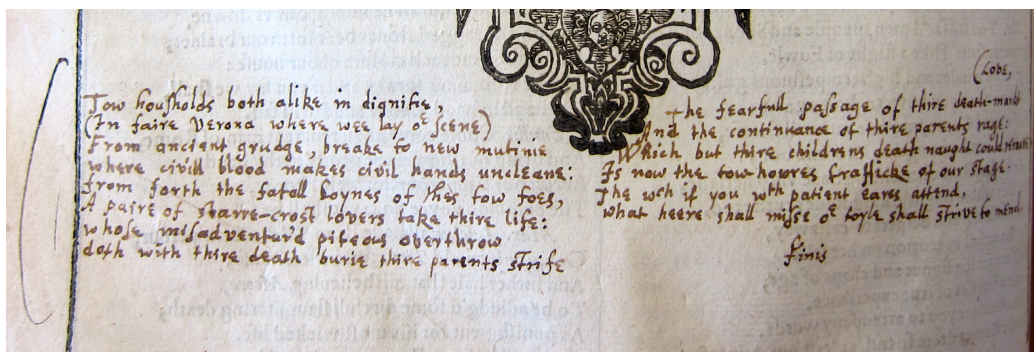
Annotating for inspiration: 1500-1990

The printing press made books much cheaper, and less likely to be shared around, so the role of annotations shifted from largely communal to largely personal in nature, with readers annotating texts

for their own reference.

Fermat's Last Theorem is probably the most famous margin note in history. Unfortunately for Pierre de Fermat, a lack of margin space in his copy of *Diophantus' Arithmetica* prevented him from laying out his 'truly marvelous proof' to the famous proposition in 1637, but did keep mathematicians occupied for the next 350 years.

Around the same time that Fermat was scribbling in his margins, a first edition of Shakespeare's First Folio was getting extensively marked up by illustrious English writer John Milton, author of 'Paradise Lost'. Milton's comments are mostly *aide memoires*, and perhaps provided the author with inspiration as he worked on his own masterpiece.



The prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, transcribed by John Milton on the last page of *Titus Andronicus* because it was omitted from the First Folio.

In the 19th century, poet Edgar Allen Poe raised the margin note to an art-form, even publishing an essay collection of his own 'marginalia'. According to Poe:

In getting my books, I have been always solicitous of an ample margin; this not so much through any love of the thing in itself, however agreeable, as for the facility it affords me of penciling suggested thoughts, agreements and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general.

Annotation and the internet: 1990-

If the post-Gutenberg era represented a shift towards personal annotation, the post-Berners Lee era has represented a shift back towards annotation as a communal activity.

In 1995, Microsoft built commenting into MS Word, and by the early 2000s an array of sites and services emerged to help teams to collaborate online, in real time. One of those was the online word processing app Writely, acquired by Google in 2006. The product, soon renamed and relaunched as Google Docs, allowed for live, asynchronous collaboration, including highlighting and commenting.

Today, it's hard to think of a modern software tool not designed for collaboration. We use annotation to share feedback, suggestions and ideas to our workmates and, unlike those medieval monks, our colleagues around the world can read and react in real time.

But there's an opportunity to rethink what it means to annotate. Here at **mote**, we start with the idea that the written word should be just one - not the first and only - choice in annotating documents and projects. We'd love you to check out our first product, the **mote** Chrome extension, and to tell us what annotation superpowers you'd love to have.