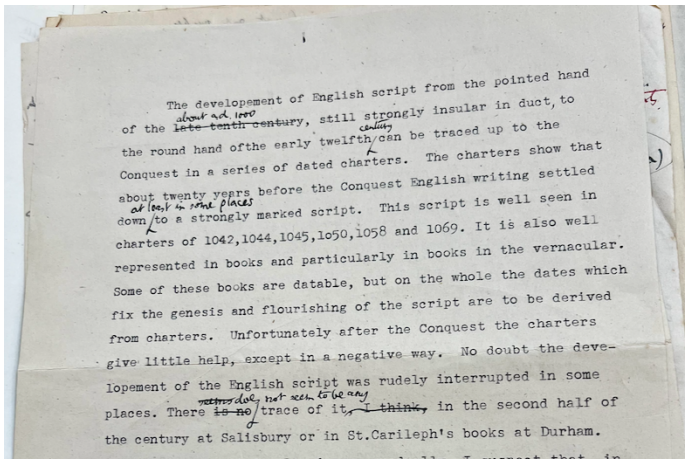
On English Script
Neil Ripley Ker[1]

The development of English script from the pointed hand of about AD1000, still strongly insular in duct, to the round hand of the early twelfth century can be traced up to the Conquest in a series of dated charters. The charters show that about twenty years before the Conquest, English writing settled down at least in some places to a strongly marked script. This script is well seen in charters of 1042, 1044, 1045,1050, 1058 and 1069. It is also well represented in books and particularly in books in the vernacular. Some of these books are datable, but on the whole the dates which fix the genesis and flourishing of the script are to be derived from charters. Unfortunately, after the Conquest, the charters give little help, except in a negative way. No doubt the development of the English script was rudely interrupted in some places. There does not seem to be any trace of it in the second half of the century at Salisbury or in St.Carileph's books at Durham. In other places it developed more gradually.[2] I suspect that, in many scriptoria, its influence was potent on twelfth-century writing. And it is possible to point to a few transition manuscripts of about AD1100 and s. xii[1] in which its characteristics can still be discerned.



The developement of English script from the pointed hand of the ~~late tenth century~~ about AD 1000, still strongly insular in duct, to the round hand of the early twelfth century can be traced up to the Conquest in a series of dated charters. The charters show that about twenty years before the Conquest English writing settled down to a strongly marked script at least in some places. This script is well seen in charters of 1042,1044,1045,1050,1058 and 1069. It is also well represented in books and particularly in books in the vernacular. Some of these books are datable, but on the whole the dates which fix the genesis and flourishing of the script are to be derived from charters. Unfortunately after the Conquest the charters give little help, except in a negative way. No doubt the developement of the English script was rudely interrupted in some places. There ~~is no~~ seems odd, not seen to be any trace of it, ~~I think,~~ in the second half of the century at Salisbury or in St.Carileph's books at Durham.

The opening lines of Ker's notes on English script in the tenth and eleventh centuries

[1] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 21050/69, Box 7.1, consulted by Elaine Treharne on March 6th 2024. This text is probably datable to the earlier 1940s. Here, it is transcribed by Creagh Factor and edited by Elaine Treharne. In this essay, Ker refers to 'BM'—the British Museum—but with actual reference to the British Library's manuscripts, as they are now known; to the 'New Pal Soc' or 'Pal Soc'—the New Palaeographical Society or Palaeographical Society and their publications of plates of manuscripts; and to the 'Ordnance Survey', again, the publishers of manuscript plates useful for comparison and close analysis of scribal characteristics.

[2] Ker notes in the margin as an insertion: 'Charters in the BM I, pl. IX (no. 13) 1133 a.d.? Mortuary roll 1121, no. 85 (Evesham) 142, 155'.

Some of the effect of Anglo-Saxon script, as of twelfth-century, script is produced by making one part of a letter much heavier than another. For example **c** has a heavy back and head joined by a fine line and **o** is thick on the lower left and the upper right hand sides.[3] This method of writing persisted into the first half of the eleventh century, but it is completely disused in the developed script of the mid-century in which the strokes do not vary much in thickness and the writing flows on equally and regularly. In tenth-century Anglo-Saxon script and in the transitional writing of the early eleventh century, the minims terminate simply in a not oversharp point or in a short, sharply turned up foot. In the script of the mid century, however, the minims have long horizontal or nearly horizontal feet and other vertical strokes (Facs. III. 27 shows these feet in an exaggerated manner).[4] This helps to give the writing a linear effect, an effect produced also by the flat curves of the bases of **b, c, d, e, o, t** and the baseline is as even as can be. These script changes are well seen in Harthacnut's charter of 1042 (BM Facs. IV. 24) compared with Cnut's of 1031 (BM Facs. III 18). The latter is still in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The former is the earliest dated example of the set[5] script of the mid century.

As much of the letters as possible is made to run along the ruled base line.[6]
Extreme regularity is the keynote of this new writing. One sign of it is the very careful distinction of letter forms according to language. When, in the mid-tenth-century, Caroline minuscule forms of **a, d ,f, g, h, r** and **s** were introduced for writing Latin, the insular letters were retained for writing the vernacular, together with the special forms **æ, þ, ð**, and **p** which occur in the vernacular only. At first the distinction according to language was not observed invariably or strictly. Full Insular script for Latin is not uncommon up to *c.* 1000 and can be found later. Caroline minuscule for Old English occurs not infrequently, especially in glosses. The insular **g** is used sometimes in Latin

[3] A comment in the left margin at this point–'WB note here'--might refer to the sequence of plates indicated ina list at the *bas-de-page*: 'B.M. Facs IV. 24, III. 27, IV 31; Ordnance Survey Facs. Exeter 13, BM Facs. IV. 38; Ordnance Survey Facs. Exeter 15'.

[4] This parenthetical comment is added in the top margin.

[5] Here, 'set' replaces 'new' in the original typescript. It is interesting to consider the import of 'new'.

[6] This single sentence appears to overwrite a struck-out paragraph that reads: 'Since the introduction of caroline minuscule into England in the tenth century two sets of letter forms had been in use, one for writing in the vernacular and the other for writing in Latin. A great deal of writing in the vernacular exists in the script of the mid century, one of the characteristics of which is a most careful distinction of letter forms according to language. The letters which are regularly distinguished whenever the y occur in a vernacular word are a, d, e, f, g, h, r, s. In vernacular writing there are also the special forms æ, þ, ð, and w. I wish to stress the regularity of all these distinctions. The distinctions are usually observed at an earlier date but not with the same religious care. In particular in many earlier manuscripts the slight distinction in the forms of e and h according to language is not observed.'

manuscripts which are otherwise in Caroline. A special form of **e** is used often but not always in writing Old English and sometimes also a special form of **c**. This a hole? These special forms[7] are due to the fact that in the square Insular script of the tenth century, especially in the exaggerated late examples of it, the left-hand curve of **c**, **e**, and **o** is formed often by a heavy almost straight stroke, inclined steeply from left to right, and sometimes with a sort of turn at the top. It was felt no doubt that this peculiarly insular stroke was foreign to Caroline minuscule, and should not be used for writing Latin. The stroke in its proper form disappears with the decay of the Insular script, but the 'Old English' **e** continues to imitate it, being made commonly with a straight back and a small projecting horn at the top of the back; sometimes though **c** is much more rarely of the same form. The persistence of the **e** form was due perhaps to the fact that in certain Old English combinations a high form of **e** was used. It would not be easy to make this high **e** with a round back. In the late tenth-century bilingual rule of St. Benedict in Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 197, **c**, **e** and **o** are distinguished according to language, and there are distinctions also in the forms of **p** (the bow is open in English and closed in Latin) and of the common mark abbreviation (a straight horizontal stroke in English and a wavy stroke in Latin).

The scribe was evidently at great pains to write his English in pure Insular and his Latin in pure Caroline miniscule. The result is most interesting [and deserves close study]. This amount of variation was not however permitted in the set script of the mid century. The distinctions of letter form including the **e** distinction are observed strictly and regularly.

During the first half of the eleventh century, the old rules of Anglo-Saxon script fell into desuetude. In the mid century, the **e** by itself is no longer made in the high form, as it previously was in combination with certain letters to which the tongue of **e** could be linked. On the other hand in the mid century, the **e** in the ligature **æ**[8] is either regularly low or regularly high in any position, regardless of whether the tongue of the **e** can be linked to the following letter or not.

These distinctions of script can be studied best in the copies of Ælfric's *Grammar*, in which Latin and Old English both occur continually on the same page, or in bilingual manuscripts, like the copies of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the parallel Latin and Old English versions of the Psalms in the Paris manuscript, Bibl. Nat. Lat. 8024, and in the bilingual charter of AD106[0]. They show one curious distinction in addition to those which I have [noted]…

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[7] The words 'a note here' might match a comment at the foot of the page remarking: 'a note here pointing out that there *are* these strokes in the mid-century script, but that on the [whole] scribes tend to avoid them in the body of the letter'.

[8] A note in the bottom margin might be related to this discussion. It reads: 'NB **æ**: Mixture of forms in 1995 material (BM Facs III. 39).

… Caroline minuscule was introduced into England in the middle of the tenth century. The gradual disuse of Anglo-Saxon minuscule and of a type of Caroline minuscule which is influenced in duct by Anglo-Saxon minuscule can be traced in manuscripts of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. By the middle of the eleventh century the ordinary English hand is a medium-sized round upright Caroline miniscule which shows only slight traces of the characteristics of Anglo-Saxon minuscule, either in Latin or in vernacular writing. For the latter certain special letter forms are based on the letter forms of Anglo-Saxon miniscule but without their characteristic duct. The special letter forms used in vernacular writing are those for a, d, e, f, g, h, r, s. These distinctions in the forms of e and h are most carefully observed even the minute distinctions in the forms of **e** and **h.**

The fact that two main varieties of this common-eleventh century English hand are found in Worcester and Exeter manuscripts respectively, may be due partly to accidents in the preservation of manuscripts. We possess by chance a considerable number of eleventh-century manuscripts from Worcester and Exeter and practically none from other religious houses or cathedral churches in their neighbourhood. There is therefore no evidence to show over what area the 'Exeter' and 'Worcester' script varieties really extended. So far as our imperfect evidence goes, the script varieties are found only in Exeter and Worcester manuscripts.

All vertical ascenders—**b, h, l þ**—are split at the top. In Old English, the Exeter script variety is clearly distinguished from other varieties. The type is much less easy to distinguish in Latin. The tendency to rigidity inherent in the common English eleventh-century hand is exaggerated in Exeter script. And the effect is no longer of a round hand but rather of a tall and narrow one. In developed examples of the script the eye is attracted by the great length of the upward sloping hair- lines which decorate the ends of all vertical descending strokes; **f** descends slightly below the line.

The angular effect is rather less marked in Old English because of the way in which the descenders of **r, s, f, þ** sweep round to the left in a curve.

This common eleventh-century hand exists in a fairly large number of manuscripts.
Royal Cat. pl. xi (Rough)
pl. 46a (Exeter)
pl. 46b (St Augustine's Canterbury).
pl. 51 (the gloss; Ch. Ch. Cant)
pl. 91 shows the careful distinction in Old English and Latin admirably, as do New Palaeographical Society 123-4, 137, all bilingual texts
[See] R. A. B. Mynors Durham Cathedral manuscripts

(One of its distinctive characteristics, in comparison with the earlier eleventh-century hand, is the straight-backed *a* (**a** not **a)**. The flat based **l**, **b**. Note also the tall **a**.)

New Pal Soc 137 (Hh. 1. 10), 234 (Hereford P.1.2 Anglo-Saxon)
Pal. Soc. 242 Tib B. i (?1045); 123-4 (Paris 8824)
BM Facs. IV. 24. [AD]1042.
IV 25.
IV. 31. 1045
IV. 38 1058
Liber Vitae f.41
Rule[?] Missal of St. Aug (CCCC 270 : 2 facs)
Nicholson & Stainer Early Bodl music pl. xix (Bodley 775); cf. pls. xx, xxi, xxiii.

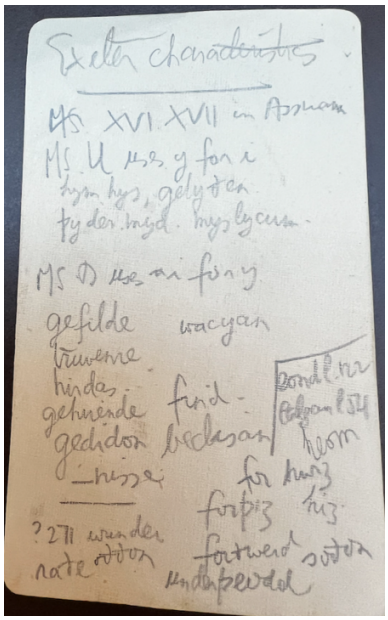
Note how the script gradually tails off into the typical twelfth-century style: Royal Cat. Pl. 39, pl. 73 (Ch. Ch. Cant.)

There is still something of the older manner persisting in the charters of Cnut; e.g., BM. facs. IV.16 (1021-3), IV.18 (1031), IV.26 (1044), IV.30.

The earliest example of the new style in BM facs. is 1042 (IV. 24).

Ordnance Survey Facsims
1. xx. (1023) Transition style.
2. Westminster XVIII (1066) not in line
3. Exeter
6. Pseudo-967.
9. Pseudo-1018
10. '1018', but ? later
11. 1031 Transitional
12. 1044 Transitional
13. 1050, the real thing, but ? not markedly 'Exeter', apart from the one Old English endorsement.
14. 1059. Not typical
15. 1069. V. good example.

Brief Notes:



Exeter characteristics[9]

MS XVI XVII in Assmann[10]
MS U uses **y** for **i**
hym hys, gelyðen
þyder. myd. myslycum

MS D uses **i** for **y**
gefilde wacyan
triweme[?]
hirdas
gehirende find
gedidon beclisan
--nisse

?271 wunder

[9] These are written on a small card (shown here in Treharne's photograph) in the middle of the papers and orthographical evidence includes the list shown here. Other words noted by Ker for these scribes' idiolects are: hi3, forþi3, heom, and underþeodd.

[10] Referring to Bruno Assmann, ed., *Angelsachsische* Homilien *Und Heiligenleben* (Kassel: Georg H. Wigand, 1889). Homilies XVI and XVII are the *Vindicta Salvatoris* and *Nathanis Iudaei Legatio*, respectively. Manuscript U and MS D are CUL Ii. 2. 11 and CCCC 196, both eleventh-century manuscripts associated with Exeter.

nate oððon