

On Pricking and Ruling Manuscripts

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In describing early manuscripts, it is now part of our duty – a very pleasant duty too – to note the methods used to prick and rule and assemble the leaves. The standard methods of later times – and by later times I mean the eleventh and twelfth centuries – had not been evolved. These standard methods are to fold and prick a whole quire at a time in the outer margin, to rule each sheet separately on the hair side, and to assemble the leaves of the quire, which is of 4 sheets or bifolia, so that hair is outside the quire, and inside it, hair faces hair and flesh faces flesh. For earlier times it has been observed, for example, that the very ancient practise of pricking between the columns is still used to some extent in Visigothic manuscripts of the ninth and tenth centuries and that the practise of pricking in both the inner and the outer margin of the leaf in manuscripts of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries is a sure sign of provenance from Ireland or England or a continental centre where there was insular influence. These observations have valuable applications. Thus, pricking in both margins of the *Codex Amiatinus* is a notable part of the proof that this uncial manuscript was written in England.

The study of pricks has been carried a good deal beyond the obvious stage by E. K. Rand and by Leslie Webber Jones in half a dozen papers published between 1939 and 1946.² Between them they have described seven systems of pricking and Mr. Jones has distinguished twelve different types of slit or pin holes made by the pricking instruments, the awl, the compass, and possibly the toothed wheel. These studies are still in the compilatory stage, and when they get beyond this, they will need I think, if I may say so, to be taken in hand by someone with a gift for clear exposition. From what has been done already I am not clear that conclusions of a general sense can be drawn. It is evident that we may get valuable criteria for distinguishing the work of centres from which a considerable number of manuscripts are known to come.

For the present purpose I have examined 18 Laudian manuscripts³ of the ninth century which belonged to Würzburg in the Middle Ages, and also that we may get supporting evidence to confirm a suspicion that a manuscript was not written in the place to which it belonged at an early date.⁴ For example, a Skt. Gallen manuscript may

¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 21050/69, Box 7.1, read and consulted by Elaine Treharne on March 6th, 2024. Transcribed by Creagh Factor; edited by Elaine Treharne.

² See, for example, E. K. Rand, 'Prickings in a Manuscript of Orléans', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 70 (1939), pp. 327-341; and Leslie Webber Jones, 'Pricking Manuscripts: The Instruments and their Significance', *Speculum* 21. 4 (October, 1946), pp. 389-403.

³ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud manuscripts.

⁴ On these manuscripts, see now Daniela Mairhofer, *Medieval Manuscripts from Würzburg in the Bodleian Library, Oxford: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Oxford, 2014).

not show quite typical Skt. Gallen script. If its pricking and ruling are also not typical, we have additional reason for regarding it as an outsider.

[I am] taking my list from that given in the *Bodleian Quarterly Record* for 1916 without further critical examination. In each manuscript, I have noted if possible five points concerned with ruling and pricking and assembling the quires: first, the number of leaves pricked at a time; 2) secondly, the position of the prick marks; 3) whether the direct impression of the ruling is on the hair side or on the flesh side of the leaf; 4) the number of leaves ruled at a time; and 5) the arrangement of the hair and the flesh sides in the quire.

Before I give the results of this examination, I should say something about the actual evidence for some of these points. The number of leaves pricked at a time can often be seen without difficulty because the prickmarks leave a distinctive pattern on each leaf, and the pattern can be seen running through from leaf to leaf and then suddenly changing to another pattern. Also, the number of leaves ruled at a time can be found because the direct impression of the knife used for ruling looks different from the indirect impression and because any stroke made on one leaf is necessarily reproduced exactly on the leaf below it. On the other hand, I did not find it easy to distinguish quickly or surely between the hair and the flesh side in some of these ninth century manuscripts. The usual criteria here are that hair side is relatively browner than the flesh side, that it is usually slightly rougher and, [most] important, that it shows flecking and stippling caused by the growth of the hairs. [This is difficult though because] the difference in colour and texture is very slight and [flecking] is only occasionally present.

First there is one manuscript, [Oxford, Bodleian Library,] Laud misc. 429 which has no trace of pricking, and no trace, except possibly the very faintest, of ruling, and is nevertheless a well and regularly written manuscript in 29 long lines to the page. I have asked [Mr.] Hunt⁵ if he would allow me to bring it here for your inspection. For the remaining manuscripts, it will be easiest if I give you first an account of what seems to be the normal Würzburg practice of the ninth century. Secondly, pricks for the lines of writing were made on or near the vertical bounding line which separates the written space from the outer margin, or if there are two bounding lines, on or near one of them, first the quire of eight leaves was folded and pricked straight through from the first leaf to the last, that is to say there is a regular pattern of pricks within each quire and the marks are concave on rectos and convex on versos.

Next ruled: either the quire was unfolded again and the four sheets of which it was formed were either ruled all at once with the direct impression on the side of the

⁵ R. W. Hunt, Keeper of the Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1945-1975. It is mind-boggling to think that Ker might have been permitted to 'check-out' the manuscript.

sheet which was to form the outside wrapper of the quire, or else they were ruled from sheets in the same way by twos instead of by fours. Thirdly, the quire was assembled so that the hair side was not only outside the quire, but also outside all four sheets of it; that is to say in the first half of the quire each recto is a hair side and in the second half each recto is a flesh side; and hair faces flesh within the quire.

Exceptions: The method by which the quire of eight leaves was folded and pricked straight through from the first leaf to the last was not followed in Laud misc. 275 and Laud lat. 102. Both these manuscripts are examples of Rand's system 2; that is only one sheet is folded and pricked and this sheet is then again unfolded and spread out on top of the remaining three where it forms the foundation of the ruling.

The position of the line of pricks is in the outer margin in four manuscripts – Laud misc. 421, Laud misc. 135, Laud misc. 275 and Laud misc. 134; it is in both margins on the outer bounding line in Laud misc. 263, the well-known manuscript written in Anglo-Saxon minuscule by the scribe Willibald, but not, be it noted, in any of the other five manuscripts written in Anglo-Saxon minuscule, all of which conform to the usual Würzburg practice.

Arrangement of the leaves

In Laud misc. 421 and possibly also in Laud misc. 275 the rule that hair faces hair and flesh faces flesh rule is observed. In three other manuscripts – Laud misc. 135, Laud lat. 22 and Laud. misc. 134 – there seems to be a great variety of practice and I was unable to see that any rule at all was observed. For one or two other manuscripts I was unsure of my facts (but in the majority there can be no doubt that the normal Würzburg rule is observed; that is, the hair side is outside all sheets, although one may find here and there a quire in which the flesh side is outside all sheets, or in which hair faces hair and flesh faces flesh). From the irregularities it is evident that the later rule that the ruling is on the hair side was not felt to be a rule at all. The rule at Würzburg is that ruling is on rectos in the first half of a quire and on versos in the second half, irrespective of the hair and flesh arrangement. If a sheet were folded so that the flesh side is uppermost – a recto – in the 1st half of the quire, then that side is ruled. But since the flesh side is only rarely a recto, so ruling on a flesh side is rare also.

It is notable that in the above list of exceptions the manuscripts in Anglo-Saxon script do not figure at all, with the exception of Laud misc. 263, which has pricks in both margins. (They are otherwise completely normal to Würzburg.)

This account of Würzburg pricking and ruling has revealed one surprising fact. The normal Würzburg arrangement of the leaves ([found in these nine manuscripts?]) whereby hair is outside all sheets has only been recorded hitherto as a curiosity. It is the

form of arrangement in *CLA* no. 124 in Corbie AB minuscule, and in *CLA* no. 252,⁶ *Laud misc.* 126, an uncial manuscript which was at Würzburg in the ninth century, but which appears to have been written in northern France. It is also a quite usual form of arrangement in English manuscripts of the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century.

I do not know any other example in early manuscripts, although there is a similar arrangement with all the flesh sides outside in two Vatican manuscripts written in France in the eighth century (*CLA* nos. 101 and 103). It is possible, however, that at a later date, this way of assembling the quires was more used than has been suspected: it is at least a common method in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the late tenth and early eleventh century, and a very convenient method it is for the collator, for the structure of each quire is clearly revealed almost at a glance.

⁶ E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores: A Paleographical Guide to Latin Manuscripts Prior to the Ninth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953 and 1957)