

## Medieval abbreviations (I). Origin

It is time to write about one of my favorite topics on working with medieval manuscripts: **the abbreviations** (the other the medieval punctuation system; [I will write about it soon](#)). **Each writing system has their own abbreviations.** They evolved by being used as well as for external influence of coeval writing systems. Scribes and copyists used them extensively, and they were a real nightmare for the first paleographers who, [during the Enlightenment](#), tried to solve them as well as even for medieval amanuensis. It is entertaining to try to solve them, to think in how scribes learnt to use and recognize abbreviations, almost as it is to see how, in some cases, even they got confused in their meaning, particularly among writing systems; those learnt in Caroline minuscule felt very stressed when reading Visigothic script manuscripts, and not only for the script!

**The practice of abbreviating words was active since the beginning of written culture** as it continues now in our digital communications (msg and so), and, as today, one of the two clearly identified **reasons of its existence** was to speed up the process of writing. It is not the same to write each one of the letters of, let's say *confirmat*, that just to write *cf.* for each one of the tens of witnesses of a charter. But besides that, medieval abbreviations were also used to get the most out of the writing material, parchment, pretty expensive by the time. Using the less space possible seems to have been one powerful reason. Conventionally thus, only these two reasons have been discussed. However, in my point of view, yet another maybe more important argument needs to be fully explored: tradition. If shorthand techniques were initially used to speed up and cheapen writing, during the middle ages tradition I think was the main reason for using abbreviations, moreover bearing in mind that some of the methods employed are more complex and laborious to write than the word itself. To me, this becomes clear when working with charters were it can be seen an evident tendency to apply, for example, those abbreviations classified under the type *nomina sacra*. But let's start from the beginning.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	V	X	Z	CH	PH
Letter	^	3	c	z	z	f	<	m	i	f	L	~	z	o	1	q	q	s	7	v	j	x	x	/
	n	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
syllable	A	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
	E	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
	I	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
	O	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
	U	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3

Example from Cod. Paris lat.11553 Bible from south Germany sheet 146

erat enim illa navis insignita signo Castoris et Pollucis qui sunt Gemini signū in caelo qui et fuerunt filii Jovis de Leda uxore Thesei regis

indeed that ship was guided by the sign of Castor & Pollux which form the sign of Gemini (=the twins) in the sky and which were sons of Jupiter and Leda, wife of king Theseus

FIG. 1 Alphabet. Tironian notes.

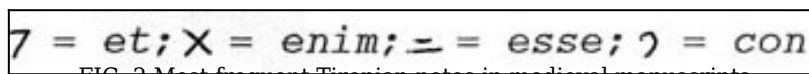
The origin of the abbreviation system used in medieval manuscripts lays in the **methods of abbreviation already used by the Romans**, obviously a bit more elaborated and disorganized as medieval rules applied for writing tend to be giving the diverse cultural background of the scribes. More precisely, in **Roman acronyms** and in the **shorthand notes, called Tironian notes**, used for official business and especially legal jargon. [see FIG. 1].

In the Roman Empire, names and legal *formulae*, among other terms, used in inscriptions and other written testimonies were shortened **by using only the initial letter**, sometimes duplicated to

express the plural (ex. C for *Caius*, K for *kalendas* or SPQR for *Senatvs Popvlvsqve Romanvs*). These are the **first and simplest abbreviations** in which only that part of the word, the initial, is preserved, and are called ***singula litterae* or *litterae singulares***.

Following the same principle, and also over the same period, another system started to be used, built again preserving the **first letter but also some of the initial ones of the word** (ex. CLA for *Claudius* or PR for *praetor*). These are called **abbreviations by suspension**. Suspension is the most **spontaneous mechanism**, but it is also the least precise one as it is difficult to solve and requires familiarity with the text itself. Luckily, in the first century AD the grammarian M. Valerius Probus collected and explained some of these abbreviations (*De litteris singularibus fragmentum*). It has **two basic types**: one preserving only some of the first letters, and other preserving only the consonants, called syllabic suspension (although I have only seen and used the former, referring to the syllabic suspension as contraction).

From the **2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries on**, the practice of condensing words writing nothing else but the initial letters was progressively developed including the initial letter of each of the syllables of the word, or at least the first and last letters, what is now called **abbreviations by contraction**. In the rare cases where the initial part of the word is omitted, we call these abbreviations **aphaeresis**.



7 = et; X = enim; = = esse; 7 = con

FIG. 2 Most frequent Tironian notes in medieval manuscripts.

The **Tironian notes**, attributed to [Marcus Tullius Tiro](#) (**last century BC**), are a tachygraphic system based in the use of some specific signs for the theme or prefix of each word plus auxiliary signs for the endings. The most frequent signs for the medieval period are those of **et, enim, sunt, esse** and **con** [see FIG. 2]. If you want to know more about Tironian notes, there is a [website on the topic](#) (in German).

The constant and extensive use of the Tironian notes in the Roman world, and particularly in administrative context, resulted in the **development of another abbreviation technique** known by the name of ***notae iuris* or *notae antiquae*** since it expanded also into non-legal texts, developed between the **2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries**, which heavily influenced the medieval abbreviation system. FIG. 3 lists some examples of this type.

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>
1 C' = cum	1 λ̄τ = autem	1 B̄F̄io = beneficio
2 δ' = dem, dum	2 δ̄δ = deinde	2 h̄δε = herede
3 e' = eius	3 m̄γ = magis	3 h̄δεs = heredes
4 h' = hoc	4 q̄b = quidem	4 h̄δuα = heredum
5 m' = mus	5 q̄q = quoque	5 h̄δib. = heredibus
6 N' = nec	6 q̄u = quamvis	6 h̄τλτεα = hereditatem
7 P' = pos, post	7 δ̄N = sine	7 N̄ = nostra
8 P' = rum	8 τ̄α = tamen	8 τ̄τ = testamentum
9 S' = sed, set	9 τ̄τ = tantum	9 τ̄τ = testamenti
10 τ' = tur	10 ūu = veluti, velut	10 τ̄τ = testamento
<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>
1 m̄ = mihi	1 B̄ = ber	1 q̄ = quae
2 m̄ = modo	2 δ̄ = divus	2 q̄, q̄ = quam, quan
3 N̄ = nunc	3 ∫' = inter	3 q̄q = quamquam
4 N̄ = noster	4 l̄ = lex, licet	4 q̄, q̄ = quod
5 P̄ = pri	5 N̄ = nam	5 q̄ = quia
6 P̄ = potest	6 P̄ = res, rubrica	6 P̄ = per
7 q̄ = qua	7 S̄S = sestertium	7 P̄, P̄ = prae, pre
8 q̄ = qui	8 S̄ = sed, set	8 P̄τq̄ = praeterquam
9 t̄ = tunc	9 T̄ = ter, tur	9 P̄ = pro
10 ū = vero	10 τ̄P̄ = trans	10 P̄P̄, P̄P̄ = propter
<u>7</u>		<u>8</u>
1 τ̄, γ̄, γ̄, γ̄ = con		1 N̄, EN = enim
2 τ̄, τ̄, z̄, z̄, γ̄ = contra		2 N̄ = nihil
3 λ̄τ, λ̄γ̄ = actio		3 N̄ = nisi
4 γ̄S̄S = consulibus		4 N̄, N̄ = nam
5 z̄uσιλ' = controversia		5 ĒE = esse
6 ετNεα = emptionem		6 Ō = on, opor, oporte
7 F̄iδz̄ = fideicommissorum		7 X̄, X̄ = actio
8 σετδuα = secundum		8 q̄ = quaestio
9 ūINDIZNεα = vindica		9 X̄ = xis, xisti

FIG. 3 Notae iuris.

ex.: $\overline{DS}$ = Deus; $\overline{IHS}$ $\overline{XPS}$ = Iesus Christus; $\overline{SPS}$ = Spiritus (segle IV).
$\overline{DMS}$ o $\overline{DNS}$ = dominus; $\overline{SCS}$ = Sanctus (segle V).
$\overline{CLRS}$ = Clericus; $\overline{DIAC}$ = Diaconus; $\overline{PBR}$ = Presbiter (segle V-VI).
$\overline{EPS}$ = Episcopus; $\overline{REVS}$ = Reverendus; $\overline{NR}$ = Noster (segle VI).

FIG. 4 Nomina sacra.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century on, with the expansion of Christianity, new abbreviations were used to refer to **terms central to Christian worship** like *Deus*, *Iesus*, *Christus*, *sanctus* or *ecclesia*; the **nomina sacra**. As can be seen in FIG. 4, they receive their name for the cultural context to which they refer to and not for the mechanism used to form them, mixing thus abbreviations by contraction and suspension. The *nomina sacra*, besides those abbreviations made by means of signs or superscripted letters that will be discussed in the next post, became the **most characteristic ones in the middle ages** to the point that it is difficult to find a text without one. Furthermore, being easy to remember and widely understood, they served as starting point for developing the next generation of (medieval) abbreviations, and provided one of the graphic aspects that these shortened words will, thereafter, always include: the small horizontal line on the top of the letters called "general sign of

abbreviation”, **macron or tilde**.

All these methods of shortening words were preserved and expanded during the medieval period, mostly by Irish monks, incorporating some others that, although having their origin in the same fundamental techniques, are classified differently.

## **Some useful references:**

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Online resources: [Abbreviations™](#)

## **[Read part II: Medieval period]**

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