"Tenacious Letters": Archives and Memory in the Middle Ages

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The characteristic of writing of most relevance to archivists is its relative permanence when contrasted with speech. Until the development of the gramophone and the tape-recorder there was no certain way of preserving words for posterity other than in some form of script. Non-literate societies attempt to achieve the same effect by other methods, for example by employing remembrancers to transmit formulaic phrases or by constructing memorable objects (like the "totem" poles of the Pacific coasts Indians, or the Pictish stones of dark age Scotland) whose consistently used symbols demand verbal explanations which are passed on from one generation to the next. Nevertheless these methods of transmitting information are not as reliable as script because their meaning can more easily get distorted. Once an oral tradition ceases to be continuously transmitted it is lost to posterity, whereas a document or inscription can be ignored for centuries and yet transmit its meaning again when rediscovered. On the other hand, if the needs of the present are considered rather than posterity, oral tradition has the political and social advantage over script that it can be adapted to changed conditions without anyone being aware that a departure from precedent has been made. Unwritten custom "quietly passes over obsolete laws, which sink into oblivion, and die peacefully, but the law itself remains young, always in the belief that it is old."[2] From this point of view the external marks of writing, as Socrates argued, inhibit memory and understanding because they fix thought into a set mould.[3] Unlike remembrancers in non-literate societies, today's archivists are not required to learn by heart and transmit by recitation to their juniors the corpus of knowledge which it is their duty to keep. Nor do they, like the urn bearers of Buganda, have to process before the king at the new moon identifying by name the umbilical cords of his ancestors.[4] Instead modern archivists store their information in

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1   This paper is based on a talk given at the Public Archives of Canada in July 1980. I am indebted to Gordon Dodds and his colleagues for that invitation and their kindness and hospitality.
2   F. Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages*, trans. S.B. Chrimes (Oxford, 1939), p. 179. M.T. Clanchy, "Remembering the Past and the Good Old Law", *History* 55 (1970): 172.
3   J. Goody and I. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy", *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 49-51.
4   J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition* (London, 1965), p. 38.

word-retaining materials, both in traditional forms like parchment and paper
and in new forms like microfilm and electronic tape. Yet archivists still serve a
similar function to remembrancers, since they are the keepers of a society's
collective record of its past.

Writing's capacity to make memory seem permanent particularly attracted
the monks of the Middle Ages, who created in their parchment books and
charters a form of record which was more durable than the papyrus of the an-
cient world and yet more flexible than clay bricks or stone inscriptions. The
preamble to Abbot Adam of Eynsham's life of Hugh bishop of Lincoln (writ-
ten shortly after 1200) provides the title caption of this paper. Adam explains
that he wishes to commemorate Hugh "on schedules" (that is, on sheet or
parchment) and "not by the bare and transient words of perfunctory speech
(*loquendo*), but by writing (*scribendo*) with its tenacious letters (*tenacibus lit-
teris*)".[5] This contrast between the transitoriness of speech and the perma-
nence of script is likewise made in preambles to other monastic works of the
time. Thus an anonymous monk of Winchcombe abbey explains that he has
taken the trouble to commit the abbey's title-deeds to writing because "when
the voice has perished with the man, writing still enlightens posterity".[6] Medie-
val writing particularly "enlightened (*illuminat*)" its readers because its illumi-
nated letters were intended to make the meaning shine through the script. It
thus served the purpose both of a memory-retaining object, transmitting
meaning through its form, and of an ordinary writing. The idea of speech
being "bare" and the voice being inadequate occurs not only in the florid
prose of monks and rhetoricians but also in legal records. From the thirteenth
century onwards a plaintiff at English common law had to offer written evi-
dence of an agreement if it were to be upheld by the court. His *nude parole* (in
French) or *simplex dictum* or *simplex vox* (in Latin) was adjudged to be
inadequate.[7]

The frailty of memory when not reinforced by writing is a theme frequently
invoked by monastic writers. Nowhere is it more eloquently expressed than by
Orderic Vitalis, the English boy who was sent to Normandy after 1066 and
who became the historian of the Norman church. Discussing the ravages of the
Danes, he says: "without books the deeds of the ancients pass into oblivion
and can in no way be recovered by us moderns, for the admonitions of the men
of old pass away from the memory of the present with the changing world, as
hail or snow melt in the waters of a swift river, swept away by the current,
never to return."[8] An epithet often applied to memory in monastic documents
is that it is *labilis*, a Latin word of early medieval creation meaning "unstable"
or "slippery". For example, a charter for Sele priory written in the 1150s

5   *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. D.L. Douie and H. Farmer (London, 1961), vol. 1, p. 1.
     M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307* (London and Cam-
     bridge, Mass., 1979), p. 116.
6   *Landboc sive Registrum de Winchelcumba*, ed. D. Royce (London, 1892), vol. 1, p. 17.
     Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 202.
7   F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*,
     2nd edition (Cambridge, 1898), vol. 2, pp. 606, 609.
8   *Historia Ecclesiastica*, bk. 6, ch. 9, ed. M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1969-), vol. 3, p. 284.

begins *"Quoniam labilis est memoria* — Since memory is unstable. . . it is necessary that things which are said or done be reinforced by the evidence of letters."[9] Medieval people had of course a high regard for oral tradition. But because they lived in a culture which was more dependent on it than our own, they were more aware of its pecularities. "Oral history," the collection and assessment of recollections about the past from living persons, which has become so fashionable in recent years, is in fact an ancient discipline. Even as bureaucratic and document-oriented a work as the *Dialogue of the Exchequer* (written to explain the workings of that institution in the 1170s) acknowledge that "decrepid old men" have a "hoary memory *(cana memoria)*" for events extending as far back as the Norman Conquest.[10] Nevertheless, literate monks thought such recollections inferior to writing. Thus the twelfth-century monk of Beverley who made a fascinating collection of miracle stories attributed to his patron saint, John of Beverley, says of them: "although memory is held firm by many people telling a story, nevertheless committing it to writing strengthens and sharpens the memory."[11]

Writing was not the only means of strengthening and sharpening memory, as that could be done as well — though not as precisely — by memory-retaining objects. In the transition from memory to written record such symbolic objects play a crucial role. Indeed, early writings are seen as being similar in kind to symbolic objects and the first archivists were keepers of precious things rather than of documents as such. The Crowland chronicler writing of the Norman Conquest remarks that "at first many grants were conferred by the bare word *(nude verbo)* without a writing or charter, but only with a sword or helmet or horn or cup."[12] This chronicler is already thinking in an anachronistically literate way, since such a grant was not conferred merely by the "bare word" as it was reinformed by the object which transmitted the memory to future generations. A well known medieval example of such an object is the "ancient and rusty sword" which the Earl Warenne allegedly exhibited as evidence of title before Edward I's judges saying: "Look at this, my lords, this is my warrant!"[13] A less familiar but better example, because it still exists, is the broken knife of Stephen de Bulmer kept in the archives of Durham cathedral.[14] To its horn handle is attached a parchment label recording the details of the gift (made in the middle of the twelfth century) which the knife symbolizes. Likewise on the handle itself is inscribed *"signum de capella de lowic* (the sign for the chapel of Lowick)"*. As the parchment label records the details of the gift more clearly than the knife does, the interesting question arises of why the knife was kept. The best explanation is that to people at the time the knife was as important a record as the label, if not more so. They were

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9   *Facsimiles of Early Charters in Oxford Muniment Rooms*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford, 1929), no. 11. Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 117.

10 Richard son of Nigel, *Dialogus de Scaccario*, ed. C. Johnson (London, 1950), p. 14.

11 *The Historians of the Church of York*, ed. J. Raine (Rolls Series, 1879), vol. 1, p. 294.

12 H. Ellis, "Observations on Some Ancient Methods of Conveyance in England", *Archaeologia* 17 (1814): 311. *Ingulph's Chronicle*, trans. H.T. Riley (London, 1854), p. 142.

13 *The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough*, ed. H. Rothwell, Camden Soc., 3rd series 89 (1957), p. 216. Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 21-2.

14 Dean and Chapter Muniments, 3. 1. Spec. 72. Clanchy, *From Memory* pp. 206-7.

accustomed to gifts being symbolized by objects, not writings. Where writing was used it was no more than an adjunct to the object. This is well illustrated by Stephen de Bulmer's knife, which even in its present broken state is larger than its label, and no attempt has been made to make the label look like a charter as it is irregular in shape and has writing on both sides.

It is probable that seals were first used in a similar way as memory-retaining objects to which explanatory writings were attached. Early medieval ones tend to be large and they are sometimes larger than the documents from which they hang.[15] From a literate's point of view seals serve no purpose which writing could not have served better. Instead of sealing charters it would have been more sensible to have had notaries authenticating them with their signatures and copying their terms into registers as was done in southern Europe. In northern Europe, on the other hand, seals proliferated and made their way down the social scale, from princes and barons in the twelfth century to burgesses and even peasants in the thirteenth. "It was not the custom in the past for every petty knight to have a seal; they are appropriate for kings and great man only," that "magnificent man" Richard de Luci, Henry II's justiciar, told an unfortunate litigant.[16] Seals seem to have persisted because they were such attractive symbolic objects. They were solid and looked durable and the imagery on them symbolized the sealer's status; for example, royal seals showed the king riding into battle as a knight on one side and enthroned as a lawgiver on the other, thus encapsulating the "*arma et leges* (arms and laws)" whereby a king ruled. The phrases in charters referring to seals suggest that they were felt to add strength to a document. Indeed, some of these phrases suggest that the seal was thought more durable and important than the writing. "So that the present writing may last always, we are led to reinforce its worth with our seal," a donor of the latter half of the twelfth century explains, and a century later another declares: "I have fortified the present writing with the impress of my seal so that my gift may last in perpetuity."[17] Such phrases became common form, but their variety and elaboration suggests that the significance of seals was strongly felt. In fact, as every archivist knows, wax seals are fragile objects and they easily become detached from their documents. Nevertheless medieval people seem to have persisted with them because, being visual and tangible things, they had more in common with traditional memory-retaining objects than documents did.

To win over the public, writings had to seem as impressive as the knives, horns, silver cups, finger rings and other objects which were customarily used in conveyances of property. The fact that writing did the recording job with greater precision and ease may not have seemed as overwhelming a point in its favour as it does to us, because against that had to be set the fact that a document might not look as durable as a knife or a horn and furthermore it might be distrusted by those who could not read. To a traditionalist the best evidence

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15 *Facsimiles of English Royal Writs Presented to V.H. Galbraith*, ed. T.A.M. Bishop and P. Chaplais (Oxford, 1957), plates vii, x, xxiv, xxv.
16 *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, ed. E. Searle (Oxford, 1980), p. 215.
17 *Luffield Priory Charters*, ed. G.R. Elvey, part 1, Buckinghamshire Record Soc., 15 (1968), p. 38, no. 27, p. 75, no. 72. Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 246.

of a transaction was a man's own word heard by reliable witnesses, next came the word of a messenger bearing a ring or knife or some other personal sign of his master, and in third place came writing. Even the clergy, who were the *litterati*, might distrust writing. In a dispute at Canterbury in 1102 one side argued that the bare word of three bishops was superior to the letters of the pope, which they said were no more than "sheepskins blackened with ink and weighted with a little lump of lead (the pope's seal or *bulla*)".[18] The promoters of written record had to show that documents were something more than blackened sheepskins. Preambles to charters insist so much on the frailty of memory and the strength of letters because they faced a public who were not convinced of these propositions. In a charter for Sele priory (perhaps connected with the one already cited) even the writer seems unconvinced by his own argument.[19] The transaction is "committed to the muniments of letters by provident deliberation," but it is reinforced as well by a seal, two autograph crosses, the names of witnesses, and a traditional ceremony of laying a Gospel book on the beneficiary's altar. The deed of gift had to be guaranteed against any form of criticism, whether traditional or novel. Scribes drafting charters in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were in a dilemma comparable to that of promoters of word processors and other novel forms of information technology at present. Even when practitioners are convinced of their efficiency, their clients have still to be persuaded that a will or house conveyance on microfilm or floppy disk is as reliable as the traditional document which can be read without a machine. Similarly, users of medieval charters had to persuade their public that a writing, which was comprehensible only to clerics and *litterati*, was as reliable as a traditional conveyancing ceremony, which could be understood by everyone who could "see and hear" (a favourite conveyancing phrase) the symbolic turf being cut or the donor's knife being presented to the beneficiary.

Medieval scribes succeeded in making letters prestigious and "tenacious" (in Adam of Eynsham's phrase) by using parchment as their writing material and associating script with the sacred scripture of the church. It is probable that the linking of parchment with Christian scripture was a deliberate innovation of the first centuries of Christianity.[20] Parchment Gospel books contrasted with pagan writings on papyrus scrolls. Parchment was seen as a long-lasting material uniquely worthy to convey the word of God. In the period 500 - 1000 A.D., the technique of illuminating manuscripts was developed which made the parchment Gospel book into a sacred object and an act of worship in itself. Such books became shining talismans of Christian endurance. Thus the earliest extant Irish illuminated manuscript, the *Cathach* associated with St. Columba, was so named because it was a "battler" against the forces of evil and was actually carried into battle as a talisman.[21] Among the legends which grew up around St. Francis in the thirteenth century is the story

18 *Eadmeri Historia Novorum in Anglia*, ed. M. Rule (Rolls Series, 1884) p. 138. Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 209.
19 *Facsimiles* (see note 9 above), no. 9, Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 231-2.
20 Articles by C.H. Roberts in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (1970), pp. 48-66, and by T.C. Skeat in *ibid.*, vol. 2 (1969), pp. 54-79.
21 J.J.G. Alexander, *The Decorated Letter* (London, 1978), p. 9.

that he used to pick up any piece of parchment he found lying about; when asked why he did this, Francis replied that "letters are the things of which the glorious name of God is composed" and they should therefore be reverenced.[22] "Letters (*litterae*)" has in the Latin text of this story the same double meaning which it has in English of individual symbols (the letters of the alphabet) and documents (letters sent by one person to another).

Whether true or not, this story is consistent with the medieval monastic idea that writing on parchment was itself an act of worship. The monk in his *scriptorium* was compared with the peasant ploughing the fields: "the pages are ploughed by the divine letters and the seed of God's word is planted in the parchment, which ripens into crops of completed books."[23] The page of a typical Gospel book, written in the monumental style of bookhand, is indeed comparable in its straight lines and letters of perfect regularity to a ploughed and sown field. Similarly, from a technical point of view, the quill pen and encaustic inks which were used did tend to drive the writing into the surface of the parchment. Well preserved medieval books or charters, which have been kept away from sunlight and damp, do look as new as when they were produced. So durable were medieval writing techniques thought to be that Johannes Trithemius, abbot of Sponheim, in the 1490s advised monks to copy out printed books, for: "Who does not know how great is the distance between script and print? Script if it is applied to parchment will be able to last for a thousand years, but print is a paper thing and how long will it last? Two hundred years at the most,"[24] Trithemius was wrong of course, as early printed books have survived the centuries because they were produced to compete with parchment. Nevertheless, his comment sums up very well the typical medieval attitude to writing. Scribes were concerned with quality rather than quantity and remote posterity rather than an immediate audience. By these means, they succeeded in making magnificent written objects pleasing not only to God but to man. Without medieval monks, writing might never have reestablished itself in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Because monks gave priority to making letters "tenacious" they had a natural tendency towards conservation and hence towards archives. In rescuing stray pieces of parchment St. Francis showed an admirable concern for conservation from an archivist's or librarian's point of view, although his inspiration was purely religious. Likewise it was the religious purpose of enshrining the eternal words of God in the fallible works of men which had made medieval writing materials so robust and the products of the scribes, the illuminated manuscripts, so impressive as works of art. Archives grew out of these religious impulses. Although some of the earliest objects to be preserved were books, like the *Cathach* of St. Columba or the Lindisfarne Gospels associated with St. Cuthbert, they were not kept because their texts were unusual but because they were associated with these saints and were preciously illuminated. The text of the gospels could be found of course in identical form in numerous books and it was primarily transmitted by recitation in choir and through oral instruction of novices in Latin rather than by book learning as such.

22   E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle* (London, 1953), p. 319.
23   *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. G. Constable (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), vol. 1, p. 38.
24   *De Laude Scriptorum*, ch. 7, ed. K. Arnold (Kansas, 1974), p. 62.

Originally, monks aimed to preserve sacred relics rather than written records. These relics were similar in function to the other memory-retaining objects already discussed, such as knives symbolizing conveyances. A relic retained and transmitted the memory and power of a saint to posterity. The object itself, such as the bone of a saint, was encased in a gilded and jewelled shrine which highlighted its extraordinary value and the power which emanated from it. Although biographies of saints and stories of their miracles were recorded in writing, the essential significance of a relic was conveyed orally to the venerators by the sanctuary keepers through liturgical ceremonies. Similarly, a relic's authenticity was tested and upheld by the cures which it effected rather than by historical research or documentary proof. Along with the relics of the saints there were, therefore, kept at shrines memorials of the pilgrims who had been miraculously cured or released. Thus the monk who collected the miracles of St. John of Beverley describes the chains, iron rings and shackles which festooned the shrine of the saint, who was a patron of prisoners.[25] Objects symbolizing gifts to religious houses were deposited in shrines in a similar way, as a gift to the house was essentially a gift to the patron saint. Tavistock abbey in 1096 deposited in the shrine of St. Rumon the ivory knife whereby King William Rufus had confirmed it in possession of a manor; through the handle of the knife an explanatory label (presumably like Stephen de Bulmer's) was inserted.[26] Other mentions of such objects, sometimes with writings attached to them and sometimes not, are recorded. Examples are the knife of Thomas of Moulton which Spalding priory deposited in its *secretarium* in the 1150's, or the gold and ruby ring of similar date which was attached to a charter of Osbert de Camera's kept at St. Paul's cathedral in London.[27] Of particular interest is the mention of an emerald ring sent by Pope Adrian IV to Henry II as a symbol of his investiture as overlord of Ireland. John of Salisbury brought the ring from Rome and deposited it (according to his own account) in *"cimilarchio publico* (the public archive)," which is identified by his contemporary, Gerald of Wales, as *"archivis Winton'* (the archives of Winchester)."[28] The kind of things to be found in an archive are likewise indicated a century later when Edward I captured Edinburgh castle and had boxes sent to London containing "documents and memoranda (*scriptis et memorandis*) and a box with the relics found there".[29] As is well known, he also had transported to London and built into the English coronation chair the Stone of Destiny, the inauguration symbol of the kings of Scots.

The first medieval archives were therefore the special places, the *secretarium* or *archiva*, where valuables of all sorts were kept. As the citations in the preceding paragraph show, such archives did not just contain writings but all sorts of memory-retaining objects. On looking into such an archive the viewer would have seen not shelves of filing boxes containing papers but something

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25   *Historians* (see note 11 above), pp. 304, 306-7.
26   W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* ed. J. Caley and others (London, 1817-30), vol. 2, p. 497, no. v.
27   Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 127, 24.
28   *Ibid.*, p. 133.
29   E.L.G. Stones, *Anglo-Scottish Relations: Some Selected Documents* (Oxford, 1970), p. 150, no. 25.

more exotic: bones of the saints encased in gold, Gospel books studded with gems, charters and seals wrapped in Asiatic silks, finger rings, knives symbolizing conveyances, and so on. Both for safety and because of the sacred nature of many of the objects, the archive, whether it consisted of metal and wooden chests or of a stone structure, would be situated in or adjoining a church. Arrangements of this sort from the later Middle Ages can still be seen at Merton College Oxford and Winchester College, where access to the archives was originally only through the chapel. From three centuries earlier, we know that by order of Edward the Confessor documents were deposited with the relics of the saints in the royal chapel; there are also references to Anglo-Saxon documents being put in the royal *"gazophilacium* (treasury) where the most special and precious things are kept" and in the *"haligdom"* which may either mean a sanctuary or a reliquary.[30] The surviving material from such places has tended to be divided by modern conservators between museums (for objects), libraries (for books), and archives (for documents). This is right and necessary from the point of view of modern policy, but it gives an anachronistic view of the original function and context of some of the material.

Gospel books provide the best bridge across the divide of modern categories. The most lavish ones are similar in external appearance to museum objects, as they are embellished with gold and gems like reliquaries. Even when opened they are not books in the informational sense, since what is most striking about them is not their texts but the illuminations.[31] These, like reliquaries or stained glass, were intended to transmit the power of the divine words to the viewer through their colour and light. Gospel books were commonly used as symbols of conveyance, particularly where gifts to monasteries were concerned, as alternatives to knives and similar objects. When laid upon an altar by a donor, the Gospel book symbolized the sacred solemnity of the occasion by associating it with holy scripture and the church's liturgy. The text of the book in these circumstances was of symbolic and not informational importance. However, because these books had such awesome associations they were sometimes used by monasteries as a place in which to record important documents concerning property. This practice can be interpreted either in utilitarian terms (any previous book was an obvious place in which to keep memoranda) or in more overtly religious terms (the material copied into a Gospel book took on by association some of the sacred qualities of the scripture itself). An example of the former purpose is a late Anglo-Saxon account of how after a grant had been made in the shire court of Hereford the beneficiary's husband, Thurkil, "rode then with the permission and witness of all the people to St. Ethelbert's minister and had it entered in a gospel book."[32] A work suggesting the latter purpose is a manuscript from Sherborne abbey of a century later in which liturgical texts and charters are deliberately made into an integrated book, as if the "secular portions were placed under the protection, as it were, of the book's sacred contents and its connexion with the altar."[33]

30   *Chronicon Abbatiae Rameseiensis* ed. W.D. Macray, Rolls Series (1886), pp. 172, 171.
      Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 126.
31   J.J.G. Alexander (see note 21 above) serves as an introduction to Gospel books.
32   P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (London, 1968), no. 1462.
      C.R. Cheney, *Notaries Public in England* (Oxford, 1972), p. 6.
33   F. Wormald, "The Sherborne Chartulary", *Fritz Saxl Memorial Essays*, ed. D.J. Gordon
      (London, 1957), p. 109.

From the habit of copying charters into Gospel books there developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the grouping of larger number of charters into books, which became known as cartularies. In appearance cartularies can look like liturgical books, whereas their function and contents is essentially archival from a modern point of view. Moreover the precedent of making Gospel books had the consequence that monks were not consistently concerned to keep the original text of a charter; their copy in a cartulary would do just as well, indeed better if it were in a sacred book.

Charters as such seem to have first found favour as portentous objects comparable to Gospel books. Early charters tend to be rhetorical in tone and impressive in appearance, but they often lack the most elementary guarantees of their authenticity, such as the date and place of issue and the name of the scribe. These features were not felt to be necessary because the charter was seen as no more than an adjunct or afterthought to a traditional conveyancing ceremony involving living witnesses and symbolic gestures. Confidence in charters as in Gospel books depended primarily upon faith. Even when a charter was written at the actual time of the transaction it might be treated symbolically rather than literally. Thus a grant made in 1193 by the abbot of Glastonbury records that "the present charter was placed by me on the altar of St. Mary as an offering, the clergy and people standing round".[34] In other words this charter had replaced the Gospel book as the object traditionally offered at the altar by the donor. Through Gospel books and the offering of documents on altars the gulf between traditional forms of remembrance depending on symbolic objects and the new forms depending on writing could be bridged. Seals served a similar function of linking the old ways with the new, as has already been suggested. To a literate a seal was a guarantee of authenticity comparable to a notary's *signum*, whereas to a non-literate it was a visible symbol of its owner like his knife or his ring.

A curious feature of early medieval development is that documents were frequently forged. The Donation of Constantine giving the papacy jurisdiction over the Western Empire was forged in the ninth century, monks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries forged charters entitling them to property and jurisdiction, Geoffrey of Monmouth invented the *History of the Kings of Britain* which became the basis of the Arthurian legend.[35] "Holy Father," wrote Archdeacon Simon of Langton to Pope Gregory IX in 1238, "there is not a single sort of forgery that is not perpetrated in the church of Canterbury."[36] Forgery on such a scale, particularly by the religious, is difficult to explain as a whole, although explanations for individual forgeries can readily be given. For example, the Donation of Constantine was intended to free the clergy from lay interference; monastic forgeries often supplied title-deeds for property already owned by the house; Geoffrey of Monmouth may have used earlier sources (as he claimed) and furthermore he was writing at a time when the difference between *historia* meaning "history" and *historia* meaning a "story" was hazy.

34 Cheney, *Notaries*, p. 7. Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 205.
35 For the Donation of Constantine see W. Ullmann, *Law and Politics in the Middle Ages* (London, 1975), p. 129. For monastic forgeries see Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 248-56. For Geoffrey of Monmouth see C.N.L. Brooke, *Church and Government in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to C.R. Cheney* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 77-91.
36 C.R. Cheney, *Medieval Texts and Studies* (Oxford, 1973), p. 104.

Nevertheless, some more general explanation is required for such a widespread phenonomen. Corruption and chronic dishonesty is a possibility, except that those involved in forgery (like Eadmer at Canterbury who was the biographer of St. Anselm, and Osbert de Clare at Westminster who promoted the canonization of Edward the Confessor) were often conscientious and scrupulous in their other activities.[37]

The best explanation for the extent of medieval forgery centers on the difficulty people experienced in making the transition from memory-retaining objects to documents as sources of information. Such objects were similar in function to relics, as has already been suggested. Just as relics demonstrated their authenticity by effecting miraculous cures, so symbolic objects retained their efficacy through the memories of their users. When the Earl Warenne allegedly exhibited the "ancient and rusty sword" with which his ancestor had fought at the Norman conquest, the value of this object depended upon the vitality of oral tradition.[38] The shortcoming of documentary evidence was that it could be too restrictive. A charter might be read out in court and found not to specify the particular right in dispute, whereas the Earl Warenne's sword could — in his own opinion at least — signify within more generous limits whatever was required. Thus objects retaining memory through oral tradition could be brought up to date without anyone knowing or even noticing, whereas charters were limited by the time in which they were made. Nevertheless, the greater precision of written documents gradually made them more acceptable as evidence than exhibits like Warenne's sword. By the time he made his alleged protest as a defence against the *quo warranto* prosecutions of Edward I it was anachronistic, as the king's attorneys were accepting only written evidence. Yet they too were guilty of an anachronism, as numerous grants in earlier centuries had been made without charters. The only practical alternative to the Earl Warenne's defence was to forge a charter in terms acceptable to the royal attorneys. Monasteries had often taken such action before and at least one, the abbot of Chertsey, did so with success in the *quo warranto* prosecutions.[39]

The medieval belief in the "tenacious" and unchanging significance of letters, epitomized in Gospel books, likewise had the paradoxical effect of encouraging forgery. The owner of an ancient but incomprehensible charter could not plead in its defence that it should be seen in its own historical context because writing (*scriptura*) should tell the truth. The sacred associations of writing made it difficult for anyone, whether literate or illiterate, to see its limitations. There was no effective training in the historical criticism of documents either to uphold true charters or to condemn spurious ones. From a monastic owner's point of view the donor's obvious but inadequately expressed wishes should not be set aside by some subtle lawyer, especially when such gifts were usually made in exchange for prayers for the donor's soul. The old idea that the charter was primarily an object symbolizing the donor's wishes for all time like a relic was still alive. The solution therefore was to

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37   Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 250, 253.
38   See note 13 above.
39   Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 140.

renew the donor's symbol by writing out a new charter which specified the points being challenged. This is called a forgery by a modern critic, and so it was by its opponents at the time, but to its maker it was a form of modernization and conservation. Concern for posterity and pride in the tenaciousness of letters gave monks a different attitude to charters from modern archivists and historians, who are committed to the principles that documents should not be tampered with and that they should be allowed to speak for themselves. These principles would have seemed nonsensical to medieval monks, because all "scripture" needed interpretation and memory-retaining objects did not speak for themselves: the remembrancer voiced the correct meaning, just as the cantor chanted the true gospel from his illuminated parchment.

I have concentrated on this initial stage in the development of medieval documents and archives because it is the period which is most different from modern experience. From the twelfth century onwards the principal governments of Western Europe, particularly the papacy and the Norman kingdoms of England and Sicily, began to keep records systematically in a recognizably modern way and to produce documents at an accelerating pace until they became a commonplace of daily business in the later Middle Ages. As the demand for documents increased, paper took over from parchment and allowed printing of mass-produced books. These "modern" methods, which formed the basis of the literate culture of the next five hundred years (c1460-c1960), superseded the scribal culture of the Middle Ages, just as that culture through its mastery of "tenacious letters" in parchment had superseded oral tradition. Archives in medieval Europe had first been filled with assorted relics and symbolic mementoes, then with parchments, and ultimately with papers. Now that script and paper have lost their monopoly and archives are again filling up with non-written forms of material, medieval experience of preserving memory can be more fully appreciated and may even be relevant to present problems.

Résumé

L'auteur, basant ses observations sur la recherche touchant le processus d'évoluation, allant de la tradition orale jusqu'au document écrit du Moyen Age en Angleterre, explique pourquoi & comment un tel pas a été possible. Il utilise la notion moderne de "lettre fixe" pour illustrer les différences de perception de l'information transmise par le souvenir & les objets commémoratifs et l'information cristalisés dans le langage écrit.