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# Intellectuals at Work: Preliminary Considerations on Medieval Scholars' Autograph Scripts (From the Second Half of the Twelfth to the Thirteenth Century)\*

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It is not unusual that, in the course of their intellectual work, medieval scholars wrote on their own, without the help of a secretary or a scribe. A large quantity of material evidence kept in our libraries shows this important (and almost completely unknown) phenomenon of autography within European universities in their earliest phase. The aim of this paper is to lay the groundwork for a new and original research project, which will be carried out mainly through the analysis of 'unofficial places' of writing, like handwritten marginal notes, comments, drafts, or *reportationes* produced by the students themselves. These sources are to be investigated with a multidisciplinary approach aimed at combining the palaeographical examination of scripts used by non-professional but cultured writers and a comprehensive study of those kinds of texts which directly represent the work and thought of learned academicians. The focus is on both the history of text writing (understood as the authors' work in progress) and the use of university books, which can be chronicled through the study of the *marginalia* and material features of the preserved manuscripts.

Anyone who is familiar with medieval philosophical manuscripts certainly has in mind at least one image of Thomas Aquinas' autograph handwriting.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas' script is so difficult to read that as early as the Middle Ages it had earned the name of *illegibilis*, a word still commonly used today to define his hand.<sup>2</sup> This handwriting has been repeatedly described as highly personal and considered a script without equal, as unequalled as the man who drafted it.<sup>3</sup> Yet, if

\* This essay concerns a very specific issue in the field of Latin palaeography, and therefore it exclusively focuses on Latin-based Medieval Europe. Since it is highly probable that similar or comparable phenomena also occur in oriental manuscript traditions, I decided to present my research in *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin*, with the aim of opening a future dialogue and a comparative investigation in different areas of manuscript studies.

1 See for example the digitized images of MSS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 9850 (<[https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.lat.9850/](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.9850/)>) and Vat. lat. 9851 (<[https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.lat.9851/](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.9851/)>).

2 The reading *illegibilis* is preferable to *inintellegibilis*: this interpretation, which we can find in more dated studies, was due to an inaccuracy in the expansion of the abbreviation. See Dondaine and Shooner 1967, 7, n. 3; Torrell 2006, 55, n. 42 and Hamesse 1994.

3 In recent times, Cristina Mantegna, while studying medieval jurists' handwriting, also claimed that 'la sola, forse, a poter essere definita 'scrittura di un dotto' sia quella di Tommaso d'Aquino': see Mantegna 2010.

one has a chance to consult manuscripts and booklets belonging to masters and students who lived at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—texts now kept in archives and libraries throughout Europe—it is easy to see that similar handwriting was more widespread than we usually imagine.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of a more appropriate definition, sometimes the expression *littera illegibilis* that used to designate Thomas Aquinas' handwriting has been more generally applied to the graphic typology used by medieval academic scholars for the autograph drafting of their own texts.

The aim of these few pages is to provide a very preliminary overview of the important but still completely unknown topic of the entirely or partially autograph manuscripts owned by scholars of European universities in their earliest phase. Many aspects of university manuscripts,<sup>5</sup> their features and the system through which they were produced and spread are now well known, thanks to the many studies that have investigated them from a variety of different perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Nobody, however, has so far dealt specifically with the issue of the 'everyday writing' (*scrittura usuale*, according to Cencetti's nomenclature), which was widespread in the universities.<sup>7</sup> Although such scripts, used by scholars to fix their thoughts in writing, have not yet gained great historiographical interest, it is indisputable that a thorough examination of such evidence in its materiality would allow us to shed light on various themes: from the more specific and technical ones, such as the development of the phenom-

- 4 See what has been argued by Destrez 1933, 183–184: 'la tentation est grand, quand on se trouve devant un texte écrit en *littera inintelligibilis*, d'en attribuer la paternité à quelqu'auteur célèbre dont on possède déjà des œuvres autographes ainsi écrites, comme Albert le Grand, Thomas d'Aquin, Matthieu d'Aquasparta. En réalité la *littera inintelligibilis* était plus fréquente à l'époque qu'on ne paraît le croire aujourd'hui: c'est dans cette écriture que les maîtres et les étudiants prenaient leurs notes courantes, et il suffit pour s'en convaincre de voir à la Bibliothèque nationale de Paris le grand nombre de folios de garde qu'on trouve au commencement où à la fin de manuscrits, recouvertes de cette écriture indéchiffrable'. Fink-Errera 1962 also spoke of the *littera illegibilis* as a graphic typology widespread within medieval universities.
- 5 In this paper, I will use the expression 'official manuscript' or 'university manuscript' to mean a specific material object that had common features and was widespread within Medieval Universities. Such books had to follow some standard rules in terms of format, parchment, script, ink, binding and mise-en-page.
- 6 The existing literature on gothic manuscripts is so well known and rich that there is no need to list it here. I will just mention the classic studies that closely concern the themes treated herein: Orlandelli 1987; Battelli 1989; Fink-Errera 1988; Marichal 1990; Derolez 2003.
- 7 The concept of 'everyday writing' has been postulated and highlighted by Giorgio Cencetti to explain the development of the writing system: see Cencetti 1956–1957.

ena of cursivity in a very early period, up to more general issues, including the cultural and social features of the authors (both as individuals and as a group), the nature of the transmitted texts, the writing practices and the material features of the handwritten personal copies within an academic context. All of these are of course important and complex research topics; each one deserves to be investigated in its own right, beyond the boundaries of this short essay, the purpose of which is to merely pose a palaeographic question for the time being.

As the issue is really multifaceted and deserves some preliminary clarifications and reflections, it is worthwhile to approach the problem gradually. It is difficult to define the research *a priori* without ambiguities and without falling into a circular reasoning, in which one risks assuming as a starting hypothesis precisely what one intends to demonstrate. We can simply begin, therefore, with the observation that many university manuscripts from the end of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries bear handwritten texts, in the form of full-page text, as well as more or less complex annotations in the margins, added by people who, in fact, read, studied, or used those *codices*. Such texts show in a tangible way the scholar's thought and constitute a snapshot of his way of working, whether he wrote texts for private use, or addressed them to a restricted class of university students or to a limited number of disciples, or in some cases to a wider circle of learned academic individuals, ecclesiastics and believers.

The concomitant presence of different clues unequivocally suggests that the writers—and, in most cases, the authors—were masters or students, lay or religious, associated with the university or the *Studia* of religious orders. Depending on the kind of autograph text (annotations, full-page text, etc.), clues about the reader's / writer's identity mainly include: (1) the content of the 'host' manuscript, which reflects the interests and the cultural profile of the learned reader; (2) the subject of the autograph text, which shows the sort of reflections and work developed about a topic or a pre-existing text; (3) the material *facies* of these texts, which do not appear as the final work of a professional scribe, but as the tangible outcome of the flow of thoughts, which might have been recorded in a hurry, as it contains corrections and revisions; and finally, (4) the palaeographical features of the writing, on which I will now focus briefly.

Learned academicians used scripts that are neither book scripts nor cursive scripts, properly speaking. Their handwriting is generally well recognizable from its common features, which are to some extent describable; and, although they are elusive to any attempt at classification, this kind of script is known and familiar to palaeographers. It mostly presents the same formal features observable in Thomas Aquinas' hand, by which this research has been inspired.<sup>8</sup> This

8 Rossi 2012. The most detailed considerations have been offered as an appendix to one of the volumes of the *Editio Leonina*: Gils 1992. See also Théry 1930; Destrez

formal identity is, in my opinion, a confirmation of the fact that the issue can be thematised, and this is the first fundamental step towards an in-depth analysis of the question.

### *The object of the study*

Speaking, even in palaeography, of masters' autographs in the Middle Ages is nothing new.<sup>9</sup> However, previous studies have focused mostly on individual cases and up to now there has been no overarching synthesis, although many scholars sometimes refer to 'scholars' hand' as if this were a rather homogeneous category.<sup>10</sup>

Since these scripts, as it has been said, present common morphological features, a specific, broad and comparative investigation may tell us something, on a more general level, about the common forms of writing between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in particular about the progressive modification of these scripts—traced with great mastery—into a cursive style.

It is known that in many cases autograph writings, recording the primitive version of a text, usually (though not always) conceived in order to be disseminated orally or in writing, were disposed of over time, due to the provisional nature of their content, their outward appearance of neglect, and the difficulties that they presented to the readers, in favour of final, fair-copied texts. Such kind of texts was generally consigned to materials that were meant to be eliminated, such as waxed tablets, or destroyed, as in the case of parchment cuttings and scraps. The fact that in many cases such authorial texts were written as annotations or otherwise on the blank pages of manuscripts, or in *quaderni* subsequently bound together in codices, explains why they were not eliminated, but have exceptionally been handed down to us. Such medieval autographs survive in a quantity that allows a detailed comparative study, aimed at shedding light on different aspects of the written production in medieval academic environ-

1933; Dondaine 1956; Gils 1961, 1962, 1965; Boyle 1991; Pelzer 1920, 1955; Gauthier 1993, see particularly pp. 7–23. On the *expositio super Isaiam*, see Gils 1958 and Oliva 2006, 213–225. Finally, on the commentary on *De Trinitate*, see Gils 1956; cf. also Burger 2009.

- 9 The panorama of autographical studies has been notably enriched in recent decades. Considering only the field of research dedicated to medieval masters' autographs, important progress has been made by wide and more generalised studies, such as, for instance: Bataillon 1987; Hamesse 1994; Garand 1981, 1996. In 2010, the Comité international de paléographie latine devoted one of its International Colloquia to the issue of autographs (Golob 2013).
- 10 On Matteo d'Acquasparta, see the works of Hamesse 2013 and Postec 2013. On Goffredo di Fontaines: Aiello and Wielockx 2008. On Pierre de Limoges: Mabile 1970, 1976.

ments. The problem is rather to work out the best and most correct method for investigating such complex evidence, once it has been identified.

Schematically, the primary preserved examples of autograph writings may consist of different types of texts, whose provisional nature is also reflected in their outward appearance, which is inaccurate and characterized by cursive or flowing writing, namely:

- Notes, glosses and annotations written by scholars in the margins of the manuscripts;
- Texts written on pages left blank within ‘official’ manuscripts;
- Whole booklets of notes initially unbound and then bound together with others.

From the viewpoint of their content, we can find:

- Every kind of notes that a scholar wrote himself in the manuscripts he consulted to facilitate his daily intellectual work—that is to say, personal comments, collations with other texts, interpretations, references to *auctoritates*, etc.;
- Entire preparatory texts for lectures, comments, books written directly by a scholar;
- *Reportationes* by students, preserved in the original state in which they were put in writing;
- In rare but documented cases, texts of other scholars copied by some intellectual for his private use.

Even though each case is different, as we stated all such texts were written in free spaces of the manuscripts, which they were not originally intended for. In any case, such texts concern the content of the main text and represent the snapshot of an original moment, in which the intellectual can be ‘observed’ as he performs his work, without recourse to a secretary or a professional scribe.

### ***The methodological issue***

It is undeniable that the study of this class of texts, as well as the graphic typologies used to write them, poses important questions on a methodological level. The first question concerns the notion of autography itself and the suitable research method to judge the autograph nature of such texts. The concept of autograph is used here in a broad sense, to designate authorial texts as well as texts written or copied by scholars who were not necessarily the authors.<sup>11</sup>

11 The same problem is raised by the autographs of the Italian literati. See Giovè Marchioli 2015. It should also be kept in mind that even the concept of authorship in this kind of text should be somewhat reconsidered, insofar as individual authorship had a different value in the Middle Ages than it would come to have in the modern age.



Of course, while it is simpler, though not exceedingly easy, to distinguish the hands of scholars, masters or students from the regular script of professional scribes, the greatest difficulty arises if one wishes not only to identify the author of a text as more than just a master or student, but also to make an exact attribution. This is, however, a subsequent step, one that is not always possible or even necessary so long as the work remains on a mainly palaeographical and codicological level, in which the object (as in this investigation) are not only individuals in their uniqueness, but a specific class of writers.

In any case, no judgment can be passed on autography, even in this broader sense, without a complex analysis, which takes several factors into account, in particular:

- (a) palaeographical clues: such texts are generally written in informal cursive scripts. The texts, intended to be provisional, are traced quickly and might present numerous mistakes and corrections;
- (b) codicological evidence: the texts may appear very messy, with deleted and rewritten parts. It is often clear that this is a 'work in progress', so the texts may seem to have been deeply modified and sometimes left unfinished. Such manuscripts and booklets are usually set up in a rough, careless way;
- (c) textual clues: corrections, additions, displacements of portions of text occur, which by their very nature can only be attributed to the author himself. Indeed, the features of the text are suggestive of a freedom that cannot be associated with a secretary, not even a devoted one. In most cases, it is clear that the author himself must have written such texts for his strictly personal use or to circulate his ideas within a narrow circle.

### ***The palaeographical perspective***

The phenomenon of authorial manuscripts, booklets and marginal annotations is not restricted in time or space. Within the period (from the end of the twelfth to the thirteenth century) and the framework (the university context) herein addressed, however, such phenomenon exhibits specific features, from a palaeographical perspective. Following preliminary, and yet extensive and reliable, surveys, it seems to me that a 'scholarly hand' with consistent features can actually be identified within such a well-defined chronological span, that is from the end of the twelfth century to the 80s of the following century. Before such period, each written expression was substantially associated with the Caroline minuscule; but, after such period, all types of writing, included those examined here, underwent a process of homologation, and distinctive wide variety of written expressions of the previous age merged into the typical, well-known *koinè* of the fourteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, while the phenomena that con-

12 Smith 2008, 279.

stitute the object of this investigation have a limited diffusion in time, they do not seem to be susceptible of geographical distinctions, presenting as they do almost uniform features throughout Europe.

In order to enter into the specific palaeographical field, with reference to the existing palaeographical terminology—not very clear or greatly helpful with the phenomena of the so-called Gothic age—the handwriting used by medieval masters is what Lieftinck calls *scriptura notularis*, i.e. that ‘Écriture notulaire, sans style, parce qu’elle n’est ni livresque, ni cursive’ which ‘se trouve également çà et là dans des livres que les juristes, les médecins, les savants copiaient or faisaient copier pour leur propre usage’ and which, according to Petrucci, would be nothing else but the *internazionale gotichetta usuale dei dotti*.<sup>13</sup> It is a neglected script, by no means comparable with the numerous examples of handwriting in the marginal notes of coeval manuscripts, which was the prerogative of professional scribes and was only used in a secondary phase (if there was any), so as to set up the scribe’s ‘final’ manuscript.

As suggested by Lieftinck, such phenomenon concerns the entire category of university scholars of that age and, of course, it goes far beyond the philosophical environment, occurring in quite similar forms within juridical, medical and scientific manuscripts. Indeed, the choice to restrict the survey to the sphere of philosophy and theology here is due to the need to identify a coherent and circumscribed corpus, and for consistency with the writer’s ongoing studies.

Therefore, even if the field of research is *lato sensu* that of the university manuscript, the writers who are directly involved are not professionals of writing; they are not scribes, but learned people, scholars at various levels of the academic curriculum, who use writing as a means of study, to annotate, comment, write their own books, the preparatory texts of their university lectures, and in some cases their sermons. Their writing does not respond to a need for clarity and readability, nor is it the serial copy of texts to be issued; it aims instead at recording their thoughts as quickly and effectively as possible. Therefore, they are men who write a lot, without having the technical expertise of a professional. One should not think of them as of inexperienced writers, far from it. However, in evaluating their writing and their graphic choices, one cannot, in my opinion, imagine the conscious reflection on writing that would perfectly pertain, instead, to other writing contexts. In any case, thanks to the assiduous use of the pen, they seem to have played an important role in the process of progressive modification of late medieval writing forms.

Scholarly handwriting, which often appears abnormal and deformed, shows characteristics both of the book script (in its basic morphology) and

13 Lieftinck 1954, 18 and Petrucci 1967, 34.

of the documentary script (usually featuring the most truly cursive forms). A comparison with the canonized scripts of university books suggests that such scholarly handwriting must have been an anomaly. However, the whole range of *textuales* used for ‘official’ manuscripts cannot be the only yardstick. To understand and study the problem in depth, such written pieces of evidence must be set within a broader framework, then analysed and accurately compared with other coeval scripts that were widespread outside the university environment as well, in order to contextualize their production and understand their origin. Manuscripts, in this case, are only the medium through which these written traces are preserved, but the scripts herein mentioned would be more properly comparable to private or everyday writings than to ‘official’ book writing. However, we cannot underestimate the fact that the *textualis* was the script to which the reader/writer’s eye was accustomed, and this must necessarily have played a decisive role even in the final appearance of the texts that were written by the scholars themselves.

Many questions arise from the in-depth investigation outlined herein. From a strictly palaeographical perspective, we should first try to understand, through a detailed analysis focussed on formal, technical and executive aspects, whether ‘scientific’ foundations can be given to that early evaluation based on a general impression of similarity among all such scripts.

In recent decades, palaeographers have specified and extended the descriptive categories that define and frame complex phenomena, such as those investigated here. Among these, the notion of ‘everyday writing’ is particularly suitable to define the class of scripts investigated herein, in three respects: (1) the degree of social diffusion, (2) their purpose, mainly oriented toward communication, and (3) the component of naturalness, spontaneity and freedom of use which allows the writer’s hand to make changes (more or less consciously). At first glance, scholarly handwriting seems to have its roots in the book tradition; but it takes shape, in most cases, as a ‘personal’ script, that is to say a writing inspired by a general model that is subsequently personalized.

In such scripts, the features of book hand and the features of documentary hand are blended together into a script that I am tempted to define ‘modern’. They reproduce the broken execution of the book hand, which is a combination of simple repetitive elements juxtaposed with one another; they preserve the cursive appearance of documentary hand, one that tends to join strokes in a *currenti calamo* execution. The relationship with the more formalized gothic of the books is expressed precisely in the execution through a large number of detached strokes, round shapes, and a disconnected appearance. One finds, on the other hand, ligatures and some letter forms, such as the uncial *d* with a sloping hook-ending shaft, and other attitudes, such as the extension of the limb of the

*h, m, n* below the baseline, or the extension of the *f* and *s* below the baseline, as in the documentary hand.

On a more general level, a brisk execution misshapes the writing, revealing some common features, such as: a horizontal, rather than vertical, development; a tendency to slope to the right; the occasional presence of loops; a simplified and disarticulated *ductus*; occasionally, two, three or more successive letters or parts of letters traced in one stroke, often misshaping some letters. The descriptions that may be made of such scripts may sound ambiguous and contradictory; yet, we must admit that conflicting tendencies can coexist within one and the same phenomenon.

Even within this context, the aforementioned concept of common writing is closely connected to a second, equally important and complex, concept: that is to say, the concept of cursivity.<sup>14</sup> The adjective ‘cursive’ is usually employed with two different primary meanings: in a very general way, it refers to a fast style of writing, one that is unconcerned with following a model, or it may refer to a script that is rich in ligatures between the letters and is therefore intended in a structural sense.

The scholarly hand provides a concrete opportunity to add several elements of research to the reflection on early cursivity in the Middle Ages. Since it is not a highly formalized script, the palaeographic examination cannot be based on such elements as the proportions, the writing angle, the inclination, the relations between the letters, etc., as proposed by Léon Gilissen.<sup>15</sup> Such examination should be based, instead, on more general descriptions and observations, which can still shed light on the modes of execution that have been insufficiently investigated so far.

István Hajnal and Emmanuel Poulle, while studying scripts of a different nature and scope, had already described medieval cursives in terms of scripts with a broken *ductus*. Even in this case, as for the documentary scripts that were widespread between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, the execution comes in disjointed strokes, even in the fastest expressions.

Poulle in particular, while analysing some phenomena of cursivity, noticed the emergence of an *usus scribendi* based on a system of ligatures, aimed at reducing the number of times the pen had to be lifted from the page; such ligatures made in circular motions did not appear until the fifteenth century. Particularly pertinent are his reflections on potential types of ligatures, *de*

14 The most complete and pertinent reflections on the concept of cursivity are provided by Mastruzzo 1995. On the theme of cursivity, see also Mastruzzo 2005 and again Smith 2004, 438–440, who speaks of a permanent genetic relationship between common scripts and cursivity.

15 Gilissen 1973.

*séquence* or *de tête en pied*, which are still an important benchmark for anyone who wants to investigate cursive handwriting.<sup>16</sup>

Even Hajnal's work on the practice of teaching writing in medieval universities, although guided by a hypothesis that was then widely questioned, is still full of ideas and useful descriptions. In particular, Hajnal showed that scripts that combined cursive execution and disjointed strokes were particularly widespread in the academic environments. Such rapidly-executed writing sees the elimination of long curved strokes, replaced by small elementary strokes, which form the letters. Until the end of the thirteenth century, according to Hajnal, such writing was still the script commonly used in books by learned men, and it would have its paragon in the documentary hand.<sup>17</sup>

One cannot fail to emphasize that the descriptions provided by Hajnal, which find solid and ample confirmation in the first steps of this research, naturally recall a disjointed and simplified execution of a writing that is typical of waxed tablets, which were commonly used in the universities in that period. Deformed letters, curved lines that tend to straighten, broken straight strokes that end in slight curves: such features, which are visible in the writings we are discussing, can also be found in texts written on waxed tablets and, generally, in scratched writing.<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, it is not inappropriate to highlight here that, in many cases, the texts that are the object of this short essay are not drawn in ink, but by means of different techniques that have not been precisely identified yet, though they were most likely drawn with a pointed and hard writing tool that left a slight groove on the parchment and sometimes even a slight trace of colour. Such texts are almost invisible today and in any case illegible, unless techniques are employed to make the imperceptible traces reappear.

The conditions in which intellectuals worked (specifically their need for speed and the use of particular writing tools) are crucial and expose the writing to changes, which generated scripts that are easily recognizable but barely legible.<sup>19</sup> Palaeographers generally deal with definitive and fully formed texts, whether they are books or documents; but here we are speaking of provisional texts, texts in progress, products for personal use, sketched out to follow the speed of thought, and intended to be revised, in a variety of ways, in one or more successive steps. The comparison must therefore be drawn, not with definitive and finished writings, but with extemporaneous and provisional texts. It is no coincidence that Armando Petrucci, while studying author's drafts, intro-

16 Poulle 1982, 1990.

17 Hajnal 1959.

18 For an overview of the use of waxed tablets in the Medieval Period, a useful reference is provided by: Smith 2003; Lalou 1989, 1994 and Petrucci 1965.

19 The most recent and in-depth contributions on these (or similar) techniques are: Glaser and Nievergelt 2009 and Nievergelt 2009.

duced a comparison with the registers of notarial *imbreviature*, from which fair copies were acquired only subsequently, if ever. There is in fact a close analogy between the practices of autographical writing in the academic/‘literary’ world and those of the documentary world, which comes to the fore in a very similar *mise en page* both in temporary authorial autographs and in notarial *imbreviature*, which were then copied into registers.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude these first summary reflections on the issue, the key issue is still how such kind of scripts could be defined, apart from the necessary initial palaeographical description. Marc Smith’s considerations on the criteria through which we define a script perfectly fit: Where does this script come from? How to distinguish the essential from the accessory? The rule from its interpretations?<sup>21</sup> Under the pressure of the need to speed up the writing process in order to keep up with the flow of thought, the writing forms, as we said, come out so deformed as to push these scripts to the very limits of readability. What is the normal model? What is the relationship between this category of writing and the better-known *textualis*, *notula*, and the documentary scripts?

Behind these technical questions, which are only seemingly ends-in-themselves, many questions of great importance arise. In multigraphic situations, such as that of the society considered herein, what is the relationship between the various writing typologies? Who used this hybrid writing, which is not used for books nor for documents, but merges characteristics of both? And what was it used for? And where was this writing learned?

And, on a more general level, considering palaeography as a comprehensive ‘study of written culture’, what do these scripts tell us about those who used them, their education and the environment in which they were produced? We inevitably return to the crucial question posed by Hajnal on the emergence of a common writing throughout Europe. Far from believing that the progressive normalization of written forms can derive directly from university teaching, the everyday writings that were widespread in the universities deserve to be thoroughly investigated, as they are a treasure trove of ‘everyday writing’ with homogeneous characteristics throughout Europe.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the university is not the only context in which the abovementioned facts took place within graphic forms. The university and its writings, however, are certainly a privileged observation post, wherein to follow the evolution of writing and in particular to observe, thanks to the first early attempts at cursivisation, the initial steps of that progressive evolution toward cursivity that would lead to the formation of cursive scripts in the strict sense, which became

20 Petrucci 1992, 362–363 and 1984.

21 Smith 2008, 280.

22 Parkes (1989, 161) seems to be of the same opinion.

widespread in the following age. Further developments of these phenomena are well known, but through an in-depth analysis of the material herein identified the focus can be placed on the phase of transition and training.

### **Conclusions**

The perspective of palaeography, with its peculiar method of investigation, allows us to investigate in detail some exquisitely technical issues, such as the processes of cursivisation in the late Middle Ages; furthermore, on the broader level of the history of writing, we can better understand the role and training of intellectuals within the lively framework that was the birth of the university. Many other interesting and broader paths of research are open to the more general level of cultural history. First, by analysing individual, specific cases in detail we can investigate the working method of medieval scholars. Then, by shifting the survey from form to content, many and new possible paths open up to us. From a philological perspective, we can deal with the issue of the relationship between the text of the autographs and the text conveyed by ‘official’ manuscripts; but it should not be forgotten that, in many cases, such texts underwent multiple re-workings by the authors themselves, in the course of time, sometimes even many years later; they look, therefore, variously stratified. Last but not least, authorial manuscripts are often examples of ‘unique manuscripts’, i.e. texts that were written in a single copy and not disseminated by the manuscript tradition. The commentaries on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, which every aspiring professor was required to compose in order to qualify as master or doctor in theology, are a case in point.<sup>23</sup> If studied thoroughly and from different perspectives, such texts, which for various reasons have not always been so widespread, can give an idea of the cultural climate of a given university at a given time.

There is no need to remind ourselves of the reasons why university played an absolutely new role in the Western world that saw its birth. Investigating in detail the rich autograph pieces of evidence written by those who gave life to and shaped such new institution is one of the possible paths of research that might be pursued, so as to shed new light on this class of intellectuals, by thoroughly examining their cultural profile from a very new perspective.

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