

Europeana Research Grants Final Report



Europeana

A Digital Database of Manuscripts and Intercultural
Dialogue in Post-Conquest England



Source: British Library, Arundel MS 288, fol. 84r. Public domain.

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Results

This project was aimed at cataloguing all manuscripts containing French literature that were copied in England between the Norman Conquest and 1550 in order to gain a better understanding of the status of French and the contexts in which it circulated in medieval England. This catalogue, the major result of this project, is now online and available here with a preliminary interface: <https://leidenuniversitylibrary.github.io/manuscript-stats/>. The interface designed for the project is available here: <https://kmurc047.wixsite.com/a-n-mss/>. The website is currently being developed by [Ben Companjen](#) at Leiden University's Centre for Digital Scholarship.

As envisioned in the original proposal for the project, the database contains traditional description information for each manuscript, including its date, contents, linguistic profile, and original owners. Given the nature of medieval manuscript culture, this information was not available for all manuscripts; this is because, among other reasons, medieval manuscripts were produced long before the standardization of modern bibliographical practices such as production dates in a book. The catalogue also contains source information which links each manuscript with the catalogue entry for its institutional repository. The data were compiled, wherever possible, from existing, open-access records, drawn from the catalogues of 114 collections housed across Europe and North America.

For a selection of the manuscripts—including a large portion of those in the British Library's Harley and Sloane collections and those in Cambridge University Library's two-letter class—I wrote whole descriptions based on analysis of the manuscripts because catalogue records were partial or unavailable. These new descriptions were based on digital facsimiles wherever possible and supplemented, where necessary, by in-person archival work with the manuscripts themselves. These descriptions may be reused by the libraries where the manuscripts are housed and by other researchers interested in the same manuscripts. My sincerest thanks are owed to the staff and librarians at both the [British Library](#) and at [Cambridge University Library](#) for granting me access to their collections, and to the various institutions and aggregators such as [Europeana Manuscripts](#) that have made their manuscript collections available to researchers through digital facsimiles.

The list of manuscripts in the catalogue is based on Dean and Boulton's list of manuscripts containing Anglo-Norman literature.¹ Two categories on Dean and Boulton's list were rejected from the online catalogue because investigation revealed that they did not fall within the proposed scope of the project: those copied on the continent (usually marked in Dean and Boulton's list with *), and those that do not contain works of Anglo-Norman literature (usually marked in Dean and Boulton's list with 'r'). In a few cases, all noted, a manuscript that was mistakenly included in Dean and Boulton's list was rejected, or a manuscript not identified when Dean and Boulton compiled their list almost twenty years ago was added.

Given that this project was aimed, in part, at recording and compiling information about cultural heritage objects that are centuries old and have survived against incredible odds, the long-term preservation framework of this project was particularly important. The project was therefore planned from the beginning with long-term preservation and accessibility in mind. Working with [Ben Companjen](#), a Digital Scholarship Librarian at Leiden University's Centre for Digital Scholarship, I recorded the data for the catalogue in a way that would comply with the [FAIR Guiding Principles](#) (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable). Aside from providing the contents of the online catalogue, then, the data that have been collected will also be uploaded to a long-term repository in

¹ Dean, Ruth J., and Maureen B. M. Boulton. *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts*. London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999.

CSV format, with accompanying JSON files, to ensure that other researchers can use and restructure the findings of this project years in the future.

The statistical analysis of the manuscripts has yielded valuable results about the linguistic situation in England during the centuries following the Norman Conquest. Most notably, this analysis has revealed that French literature very rarely circulated on its own. Of the 810 manuscripts included in the catalogue, only 184 are monolingual—a mere 22.7%. The extent and nature of the multilingual contexts of England's French writing has not been commented on before and represents a significant result of this project. Given that manuscripts were often designed with a purpose, and can often provide insight into the literary tastes of their patrons, these findings suggest that French was most often read in multilingual contexts and by multilingual patrons.

The project has also provided valuable quantitative evidence about the most important periods for the production of Anglo-Norman literary volumes. Most significantly, it has revealed that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were by far the most important for the production of these volumes. These findings, which have been shared with the academic community in two conference presentations and will be shared in two articles, point to the persistence of French as an important language for literary production for centuries following the Conquest and speak to the fundamentally multilingual nature of written production in medieval England.

Target audience

Overall, the project was aimed at those interested in the linguistic environment of medieval England and the development of English and French. The detailed quantitative findings of the project, including information about the geographical and historical distribution of French texts in England, was aimed at anyone studying related material, including those working in the fields of historical linguistics, book history, literature, and the history of the French and English language. These groups are also the primary target audience for the catalogue that was created for the project, which has brought together, and expanded upon, information about manuscripts from widely disparate collections for the first time.

The broader findings of the project, which have highlighted the fundamentally multilingual and international nature of medieval England in the centuries following the Norman Conquest, have been shared with the wider public through micro-blogging [using my personal Twitter account](#). The goal has been to communicate the information efficiently by sharing snippets of multilingual manuscripts from medieval England with short, information-dense captions explaining the significance of each language situation. These communications have reached a larger audience than traditional forms of academic outreach; for example, [one was 'liked' over 1,700 times](#) and, according to Twitter's built-in analytics, has received over 220,000 impressions to date. I have also aimed at providing further information about the project by answering questions I have received about it through Twitter. This mix of information-dense snippets and more in-depth contextual information has been aimed at communicating the project findings as broadly and efficiently as possible without sacrificing any of the nuance or context that can sometimes be lost through micro-blogging alone.

Use of the data

The [Europeana Collections](#) have furnished crucial catalogue and linguistic information for several of the manuscripts analyzed, with 113 manuscripts in the catalogue linked to the [Europeana Manuscripts Collections](#). For manuscripts such as British Library, Egerton MS 3277, Europeana provided traditional catalogue data, including the date of the manuscript, its ownership

history, its place of production, and the contents of the manuscript. For many of the manuscripts housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which has linked a large portion of its digital collections with Europeana's, I have used both the traditional catalogue information from Europeana's infrastructure and its digital facsimiles of manuscripts to check linguistic and textual data. These Europeana-provided facsimiles have been instrumental to the project, since without them, linguistic and textual data would, in many cases, have to be checked through in-person consultation, and this would not have been feasible for all manuscripts given the scale of this project.

Publications and Output

The major output of this project is the catalogue of manuscripts. The catalogue has been designed to be freely accessible to other interested parties and researchers working on similar topics. The data have been compiled and stored in keeping with the FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management. Data have been stored in a CSV format, since CSV will ensure that the data compiled for the project are interoperable and reusable—in other words, that other researchers will be able to draw on the data for their own projects, and transform them into a wide variety of different formats. Aside from furnishing the material for the online catalogue, the CSV files and accompanying JSON files are set to be uploaded to a sustainable open access digital repository to ensure that they will remain accessible to researchers for any purposes for many years in the future.

The goal of making the project open access has also informed the analysis of the project data. The code for calculating the distribution of languages in each manuscript, created by Ben Companjen at Leiden University, has been designed to be useful for others working on similar projects and made readily available to others. This goal of ensuring that the project was accessible, interoperable and sustainable led to it being featured as a case study in "[FAIR Data Advanced Use Cases: from principles to practice in the Netherlands](#)" (pp. 30-36), a recent report by Melanie Imming (2018).

With the aim of sharing the results of the project with the wider scholarly community, and in keeping with the initial project proposal, the findings of the project have been shared at two academic conferences:

1. "A Digital Database of Manuscripts and Language Use in Post-Conquest England." Digital Humanities Benelux, 7 June, 2018.
2. "The Status of Anglo-Norman in Post-Conquest England: A Quantitative Approach." Swansea University Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Research Symposium by the Sea, 28-30 June, 2018.

The project goals, methodology, and digital tools will be shared in a Leiden University Centre for Digital Humanities talk that will be presented by me and Ben Companjen in September. Two research articles are also under development. The first, which is being co-written by me and Mr. Companjen, will be submitted for peer review to the Digital Humanities Benelux journal for their October 1st deadline. This journal has been chosen because its open access and digital focus are in keeping with the goals of this project. This article explains the quantitative approach of this project and the script that was newly developed for identifying languages within a manuscript.

The second article, which I am writing alone, is aimed at sharing the results of the statistical analysis of the data compiled for the project with the broader academic community, while also contextualizing them within current sociolinguistic, codicological and historical research into writing production in medieval England. Among other conclusions, this piece highlights the overwhelming quantitative evidence for the persistence of French as a valuable literary language for centuries after the Norman Conquest and supports recent qualitative findings about the importance of French for international exchange and trade in the post-Conquest period.



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