

Cyprian in England

MS 130 in the New College Library has a part to play in a curious philological tale. For it stands, most unusually, in a textual tradition whose antique archetype is extant. Normally, for a text composed in Antiquity, the archetype can only be posited to have existed; it is something which gathers its shape in the outline created by a comparison of the common and separate errors in the extant witnesses. The textual critic uses these clues to angle backwards towards the archetypal copy from which those later witnesses, many centuries later, apparently trace their descent. The archetype is normally only hypothetical, it is a vanishingly unlikely chance to find one that exists. But that is precisely what one is able to do with the tradition to which MS 130 belongs.

The manuscript contains the treatises and letters of St Cyprian of Carthage (d. AD 258). It belongs to a small group of English manuscripts that transmit the letters in a unique collocation. In this, they appear to depend on a late fourth-century exemplar, a fragment of which survives. It was discovered at Arundel Castle in the early twentieth century, folded, cut down and in use as flyleaves in a twelfth-century theological manuscript. In the anonymous sale of manuscripts at Sotheby's on 20 December 1921, The British Library purchased the volume and flyleaves together for £40. The Cyprian fragments (fols. 1–5), along with the other flyleaves, which come from a late ninth-century copy of the Old English Martyrology (fols. 6–7), were removed and bound together as MS Add. 40165 A. It is rare indeed that flyleaves—manuscript waste—can have given quite so much to two separate textual traditions.

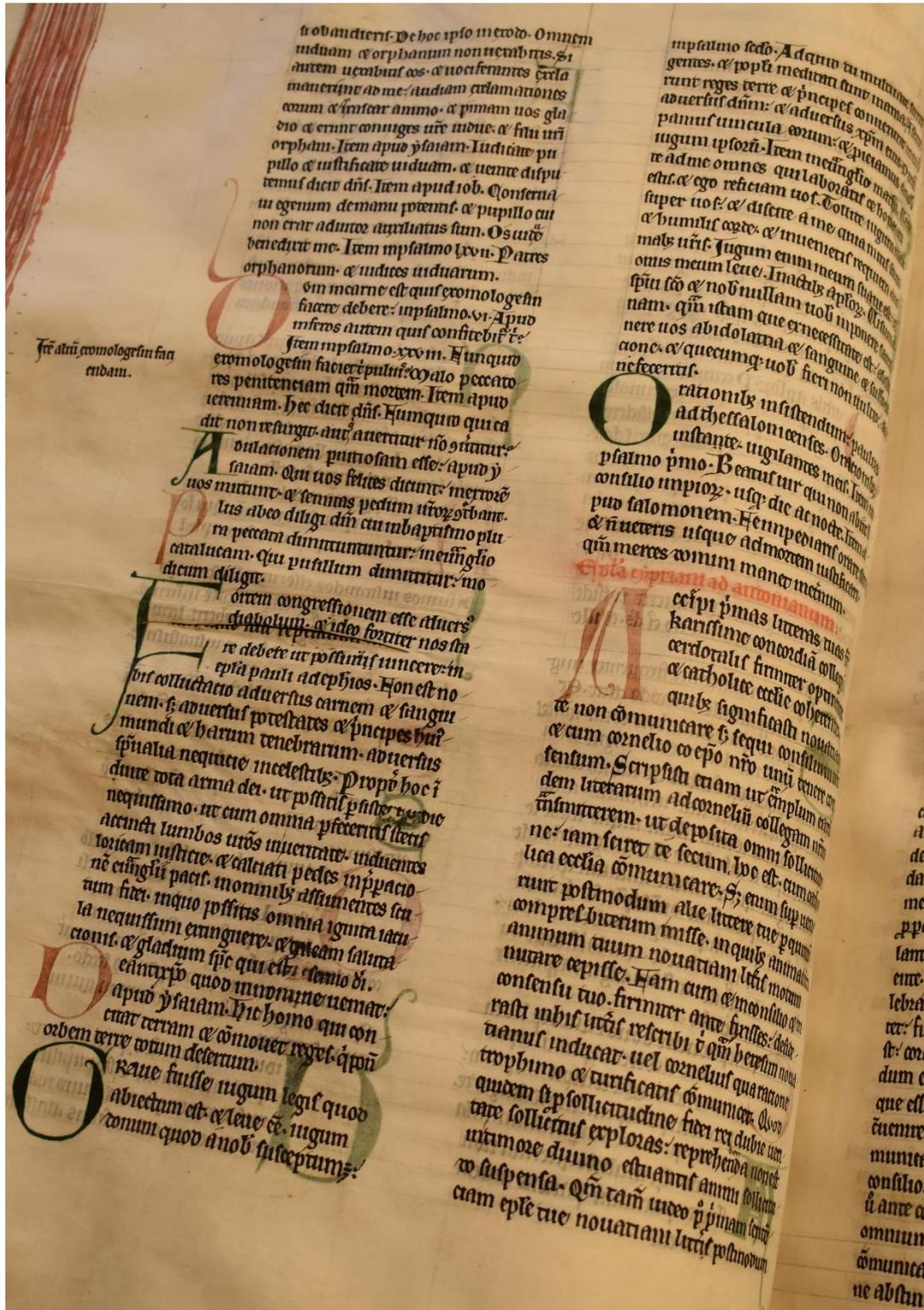
It is the fragment of Cyprian which is the focus here. Parts of two parchment bifolia and one other leaf from the same quire are involved. The text is written in four columns to the page—the only extant Latin codex to be written in four columns—in a stylish early, north African uncial script of the late fourth-century.¹ Few could resist the speculation that Cyprian's episcopal see of Carthage was the original venue. The book was brought from Africa to Anglo-Saxon England at an early date. Glosses using Insular letter forms of the eighth century show that the manuscript was then in England: Insular letter forms of 'v r', for example, are written over uncial 'U R' on fol. 2v.² The most plausible bridge from North Africa (possibly Carthage) to Anglo-Saxon England is provided in the person of Hadrian of Niridanum (d. 710), a native of north Africa according to Bede, sent by the pope with Theodore of Tarsus (d. 690) to reinvigorate the English church. Theodore was consecrated archbishop of Canterbury in Rome in 28 March 668 and the two men arrived in Kent on 27 May 669. The celebrated Greek and Latin school they founded at Canterbury was the wellspring for the golden age of Anglo-Saxon scholarship which followed.³ The volume of Cyprian would plausibly have formed part of their library, and it may have been at Canterbury still when it was broken up and used for flyleaves, some text then being scraped off to accommodate a table of contents in a twelfth-century hand. Old books written in unfamiliar scripts or languages were always vulnerable to that sort of cannibalism in the middle ages. One wonders what antique treasures might have lain beneath the slighting references to 'libri antiquissimi' and 'libri inutiles' which are sometimes encountered in medieval library catalogues.

The Cyprian fragment offers three letters together, *epp.* 55, 74, 69, a collocation that exists nowhere else but in a closely-related group of English manuscripts, classified by Cyprian's editor

¹ E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, 11 vols & supplement (Oxford 1934–71), 2. 178 and Suppl. vii–ix. Fols. 2v and 3r were reproduced by W. Schipper, 'Digitising (Nearly) Unreadable Fragments of Cyprian's *Epistolary*', in *The Book Unbound: Editing and Reading Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. S. Echard and S. Partridge (Toronto, 2004), pp. 157–168. Digital images are available online from the British Library's Digitised Manuscripts site (<www.bl.uk/manuscripts>). For bibliography, see H. Gneuss & M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts. A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto, 2014), no. 297.

² Schipper, 'Digitising (Nearly) Unreadable Fragments', pp. 157–68, at 160.

³ B. Bischoff and M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994).



New College Library, Oxford, MS 130, f. 53v

as 'n'.⁴ Eight of the manuscripts are from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries: Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 210 (Gloucester abbey), BL MS Arundel 217 (Fountains abbey), Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 154 (Buildwas abbey) with the closely related Paris, BnF MS lat. 1656

⁴ H. Frhr. von Soden, *Die Cyprianische Briefsammlung*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, new ser. 10/3 (Leipzig, 1904), pp. 130–32; also M. Bévenot, *The Tradition of Manuscripts* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 11–14, 52–53.

(English script), Lambeth Palace, MS 106 (Lanthonypriory); BL Royal 6 B. xv (Salisbury cathedral), Shrewsbury School, MS 26 (Christ Church, Canterbury), and New College 130. There are three further witnesses from the end of middle ages.

What may be said of our manuscript? Not perhaps as much as one would like since it has lost any mark of ownership it might once have had; but there are a few observations that bear making. By its script, it was written very early in the thirteenth century and in England, with every appearance of having been done by Cistercian monks. It has the dignified restraint of a Cistercian manuscript, a plainness—in itself rather stylish—which was in keeping with the principles of life established by the order's rule.⁵ There is nothing here to distract the eye or excite fickle pleasure. The initials are plain, unelaborated and applied flat, and obey the 'one-colour rule' established by a statute of the Cistercian general chapter datable to c. 1145 × 1151.⁶ There is no scheme of marginal figures, animals and grotesques, such a popular feature of other books of this date. There are a few drawings at the foot of a few pages, but these are doodles by a reader, albeit rather skilfully done. It may be significant that there are wyverns on fols. 20r and 40v, a decorative motif found quite widely in Cistercian manuscripts, particularly in early manuscripts from the mother-house of Cîteaux, which these resemble in style. Flex punctuation (*punctus flexus*) is also present: shaped rather like a jagged question mark, the mark signifies a medial pause within a *sententia* where the *sensus* is complete but the *sententia* is not.⁷ It is a near unique characteristic of Cistercian scribal production in the twelfth century.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 130, f. 40v

⁵ On which, see A. Lawrence, 'English Cistercian Manuscripts of the Twelfth Century', in *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles*, ed. C. Norton and D. Park (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 284–98; and 'Cistercian Decoration: Twelfth-Century Legislation on Illumination and its Interpretation in England', *Reading Medieval Studies* 21 (1995), pp. 31–52.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 36.

⁷ M. B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Aldershot 1992), pp. 35–38.

Taking these hints together, the manuscript would join a small subset from Cistercian libraries: Arundel 217 is from Fountains abbey in the North Riding of Yorkshire and Pembroke 154 is from Buildwas in Shropshire. The provenance of these two manuscripts lends us nothing very helpful: those two monasteries are the best represented by surviving books of all English Cistercian libraries.⁸ Whilst there is no easy inference on the provenance of the New College manuscript, there is an unusual feature which this manuscript alone shows. While the rest of the treatises and letters arrange normally, the order of the three letters communicated by the antique fragment is not standard. Letter 55 is in the normal place but the two which follow, 74 and 69, are instead given at the back of the discrete booklet which contains the letters, on fols. 108r and 110r respectively. Furthermore, the hand which begins letter 55 on fol. 53v breaks off at fol. 56v, halfway through c. 27, and a coeval scribe continues from the top of fol. 57r ('Et qui in peccatis committendis | uoluntatem diaboli facit'). Bévenot, whose article on the BL fragment is the central discussion, perhaps overplayed the significance of this disturbance in the New College manuscript, projecting a lacuna in its exemplar which was subsequently made good by the second hand using a manuscript representing the text of the fragment.⁹ In fact, the change of hand represents no more than the start of a new scribal stint on the first leaf of new quire: the first scribe signed off with a quire signature at the foot of 56v. None the less, MS 130, which otherwise follows the ordering of the English group, offers evidence here for some sort of disturbance at some point in the chain of transmission of these particular letters.

Two of these three letters of Cyprian concern the rebaptism controversy, in which Cyprian held the African position in favour of rebaptism for former heretics coming into the Church who had been baptized outside it. Letter 74, addressed to Stephen, later bishop of Rome, makes the case most aggressively, even sarcastically, against Stephen's views to the contrary. It was Stephen's traditional view which would prevail, however, and render Cyprian's view unorthodox.¹⁰ Bévenot drew attention to a most interesting note in a manuscript of Cyprian from the abbey of Clairvaux, a second mother-house of the Cistercian order.¹¹ Troyes, Médiathèque du Grand Troyes, MS 37, is a twelfth-century manuscript which has been carefully revised and contains marginal notes relating to the practice of reading aloud in the refectory during meal-times. Next to letter 73 is the note: 'This letter and those following must not be read out. For in them St Cyprian, along with many other bishops, openly declares that heretics and schismatics who return to the Church are to be baptized again, a thing which holy Church today, as also St Augustine in the 6th book of his *De baptismo parvulorum*, fiercely repudiates.' The 'following letters' in this collocation include a record of the voting from Cyprian's spring synod of 256 which examined the issue, and then *ep.* 70, 71, 69, 72, and 74. Letters 69–75 are indeed the texts traditionally dated to the time of the rebaptism controversy.¹² The fact that letters 74 and 69 are both out of sequence at the back in the New College manuscript is therefore of interest, and it is of interest too that the BL fragment should contain just these texts. It raises the possibility that the fragment does not represent a surviving portion of a dismembered manuscript but was a portion deliberately excised because of its contents. The central letter, *ep.* 74, was no doubt the principal object of offence, and it carried away with it the letters standing on either side in its quire. It cannot have been the BL fragment which supplied the missing text to the New College manuscript since that was already in use as flyleaves by the date of writing. Instead, it would seem that our manuscript was made from an exemplar which descended from the antique codex after the expurgation of these letters, and which had been made good from elsewhere.

⁸ Data available from N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, digital 3rd edn, MLGB3 (2015) available online from the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁹ M. Bévenot, 'The Oldest Surviving Manuscript of St Cyprian now in the British Library', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new ser. 30 (1980), pp. 368–77, at pp. 370–371.

¹⁰ See further K. Shuve, 'Cyprian of Carthage's Writings from the Rebaptism Controversy: Two Revisionary Proposals Reconsidered', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new ser. 61 (2010), pp. 627–643.

¹¹ Bévenot, 'Oldest Surviving Manuscript', p. 376.

¹² Shuve, 'Cyprian of Carthage's Writings', p. 627 n. 1.

The exemplar of our manuscript would naturally have been provided by another house within the order, and it is significant in this connection that there should be evidence for hostility among Cistercians to Cyprian's views on rebaptism. Here, the *Registrum Anglie* adds a grain of knowledge. This was a union catalogue apparently compiled by Franciscan friars in Oxford at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It details around 1,400 works by ancient, patristic and medieval writers, on the basis of first-hand searching in 185 monastic and cathedral libraries in England, Scotland and Wales.¹³ The letters of Cyprian were reported for fourteen houses, with a further eight libraries containing one or two individual treatises.¹⁴ Of the fourteen houses which held the letters, only one may be matched to an extant manuscript, which is the Buildwas manuscript. There happen to be four other Cistercian monasteries in this return: Woburn (Beds), Ford (Devon), Margam (Glams), and Bordesley (Worcs); the New College manuscript might have been copied from, or indeed have belonged to, any or none of these. The evidence of the *Registrum*, a partial record only, shows that Cyprian's letters had decent circulation, was favoured particularly in Cistercian houses, and warns against expecting to find an easy provenance for our manuscript.

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¹³ *Registrum Anglie de libris doctorum et auctorum veterum*, ed. R. H. Rouse, M. A. Rouse and R. A. B. Mynors, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 2 (London, 1991).

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 145–149.