

A Book with a Price in the World: New College MS 274

How should college students pay for their education? How can colleges meet their own expenses? Although such questions feel new, similar concerns surfaced at the very moment European universities began to appear *en masse* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After all, like modern students, medieval students had to pay for instruction, and colleges had to build or rent space for teaching.

Then, as now, institutions had a variety of responses to funding shortages, and the University in medieval Oxford devised one very creative solution. In 1240 Robert Grosseteste (at that time Bishop of Lincoln and former Chancellor of Oxford University) started St. Frideswide's Chest, which provided loans to struggling students, teachers, and recent university graduates. The loan chest model caught on, and by 1350 over a dozen chests were in operation.

St. Frideswide's and the chests that followed all operated by a simple scheme. As with a modern day pawn shop, a prospective borrower had to bring collateral to a chest where it would be appraised. It would then be placed in the chest as a pledge for the loan.¹ The more advanced the scholar, the more he could borrow. The more valuable the collateral, the larger the loan. Scholars used all sorts of objects—spoons, dishes, cups—to secure loans. Yet predictably, medieval academics tended to deposit one thing in particular: their books.

Enter New College Manuscript 274, a late thirteenth-century copy of Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis* [*Natural History*]. Written in the first century, the *Historia naturalis* was a key source of knowledge about geography and natural history for the medieval world and Renaissance. This particular copy of the *Historia* likely originated at St. Albans Abbey, an active centre for textual production at that time.² This point of origin is further supported by a map at the manuscript's front, one possibly modeled on a map made by Matthew Paris, a monk of the Abbey of St. Albans famous for his cartography. Regardless of its starting point, by the fifteenth century the manuscript found its way to Oxford and also into one of the loan chests in operation there.

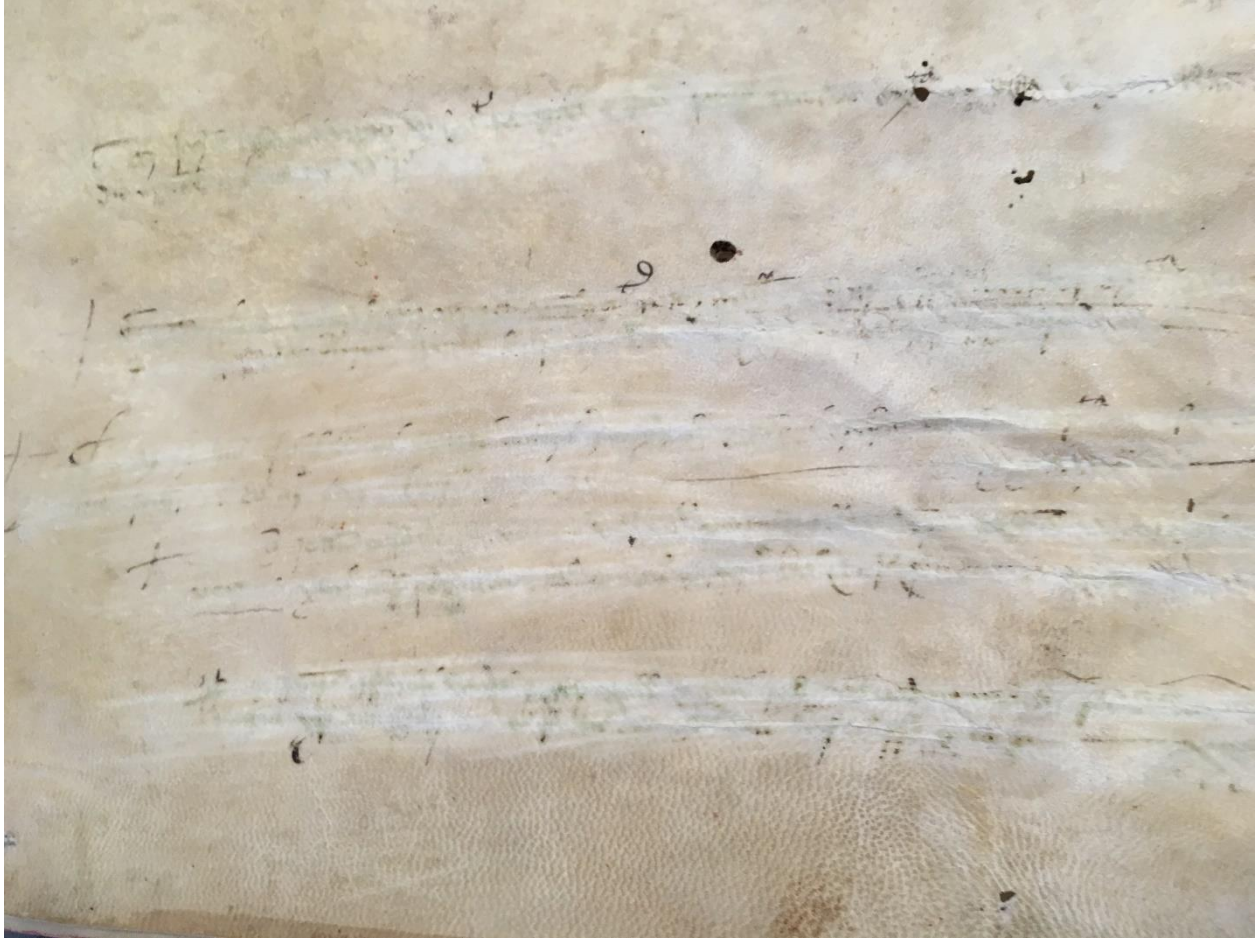
How can we tell that scholars used MS 274 to secure a loan? Very simply, the manuscript itself tells us. When a manuscript entered a loan chest, the chest keepers would record a *caucio* (or pledge note), with the name of the chest, names of the borrowers, date of the loan, and value of the book. Although later erased, five records of borrowing still appear faintly on folio iii recto and are legible under UV light.³ When deciphered, the scrapped away notes reveal that over the course of eight years, two scholars—Johannes Consobrinus, a doctor of theology of Paris and Oxford, and John Warder, a bachelor of theology—together pledged MS 274 into the Queen's Chest in 1453, 1455, 1457, 1459, and 1461.

With their bold, conspicuous script and prominent placement, the pledge notes left by Consobrinus and Warder reveal the ways loan chests had started to reframe scholars' relationships to their books. Not quite price tags and yet not wholly unlike them, *cauciones* not only marked a moment when a volume left academic circulation but also turned an academic text into a potential item for sale. Pledged books were no longer just repositories for intellectual thought but commodities whose exchange value has become an integral part of their worth.

¹ All of the chests were likely located in the University's Congregation House.

² For this and for the discussion of scripts below, I have used manuscript description given by Dr James Willoughby in his forthcoming catalogue of manuscripts in New College Library, Oxford.

³ These particular pledges were deciphered by Graham Pollard and then reaffirmed later by James Willoughby in his catalogue of the manuscripts of New College, Oxford.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 274, f. iii recto [detail]

Indeed, the very presentation of the notes testifies to this instrumentalization of scholarly works. We see this clearly in MS 274, where the casual and uneven script of the *cauciones* breaks from the formal *textura praescissa libraria* script used for Pliny's *Natural History*. These five pledge notes also violate the text's two-column format, offering another reminder that pledges literally exceed the confines of the text's academic parts. In short, whereas the text itself follows a carefully prescribed presentation, the writers of the pledge notes use just about every means possible to ensure that *cauciones* stand out as a meta-textual frame for the material that follows them.

The identities of the borrowers further testify to the ways MS 274 had become a utilitarian and transactional object. The primary borrower, Johannes Consobrinus, was a Carmelite scholar born in Lisbon who seems to have obtained a doctorate in Paris. He later came to Oxford for another doctorate of theology, which was awarded in 1449.⁴ And at some point in his career, he wrote *De Justitia commutativa*, a tract in which he theorized notions of justice.⁵ The second borrower,

⁴ A. B. Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500* 3 vols. (Oxford: 1957), vol. 3, p. 478. Emden also notes that Consobrinus later returned to Lisbon, where he became tutor and confessor to King Alfonso V, the king of Portugal, and then died of poison in 1475.

⁵ It is also worth noting that in *De iustitia commutativa*, Consobrinus 'conceived commutative justice basically as an economic, transactional notion between private persons' and his work 'deals with property (*dominium*), contractual fraud, usury, and aleatory contracts'. See Izhak Englard, *Corrective and Distributive Justice from Aristotle to Modern Times* (Oxford, 2009), p. 178, n. 764. In other words, pledging MS 274 was in line with Consobrinus's own ideas of justice.

John Warder, was a Benedictine monk at St. Albans who likely came to Oxford in 1453.⁶ A lower level scholar at the time of these loans, he supplicated for his bachelor's degree in theology in 1454. In short, neither Consobrinus nor Warder had an intellectual or academic affinity for Pliny's writings: both were theologians. And while the *Historia naturalis* may have served as a resource for a scholar of the arts, it had no place in the theology curriculum. Thus if John Warder brought this book with him from St. Albans to Oxford, he did so for financial, not academic, reasons: this was an asset that could be leveraged for capital.⁷

Further enhancing the commodification of MS 274 is the appraisal note by Oxford stationer John Godsond that lies just above the list of *cauciones*.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 274, f. iii recto [detail]

One of the fifteenth-century stationers officially appointed by the University, part of Godsond's job was to appraise items brought to the chests. In this capacity Godsond determined the cash value a book might obtain if unclaimed after the term of the loan, which would be the loan

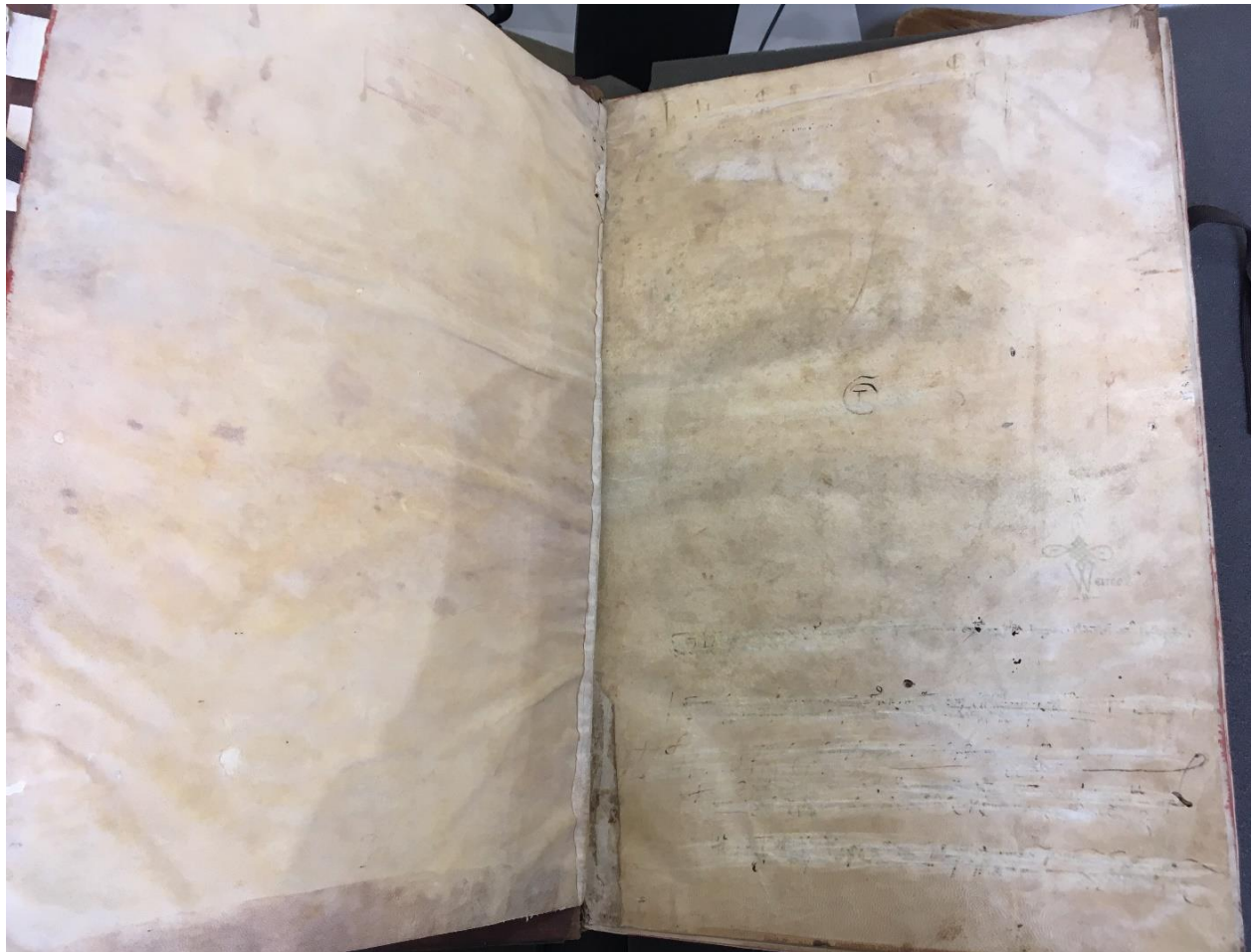
⁶ BRUO, iii. P. 1983.

⁷ The reasons for the loan, and the question of who the primary borrower might be, remain unclear. But given that (according to Thomson) the manuscript likely originated in St. Albans, it is possible that Warder had the original possession. As for why he co-signed with Consobrinus, it is likely that one of the two needed to increase his borrowing amount. As a doctor, Consobrinus would have been entitled to take 30 shillings, whereas Warder, a bachelor, would have been capped at 6shillings and 8 denarii. *Graham Pollard Papers*, Box 262, fols. 4-5.

amount. He had good reason to make accurate assessments. Chest statutes dictated that unclaimed volumes would be sold within a few weeks after the loan date. If a volume did not sell for the amount assigned to it, the stationer would have to cover the difference.⁸

Unlike the erased pledges below it, Godsond's mark has remained clear, and it offers a lasting reminder that the book had been officially appraised. A distinctive 'P' inside a circle, Godsond's valuation is a bit like a price tag without a price. It hovers in the page's centre followed by a scrubbed-out price of 33 shillings and 4 denarii. The only part of the page that remains unerased, the mark itself contributes as much to the book's valuation as the price that follows it.

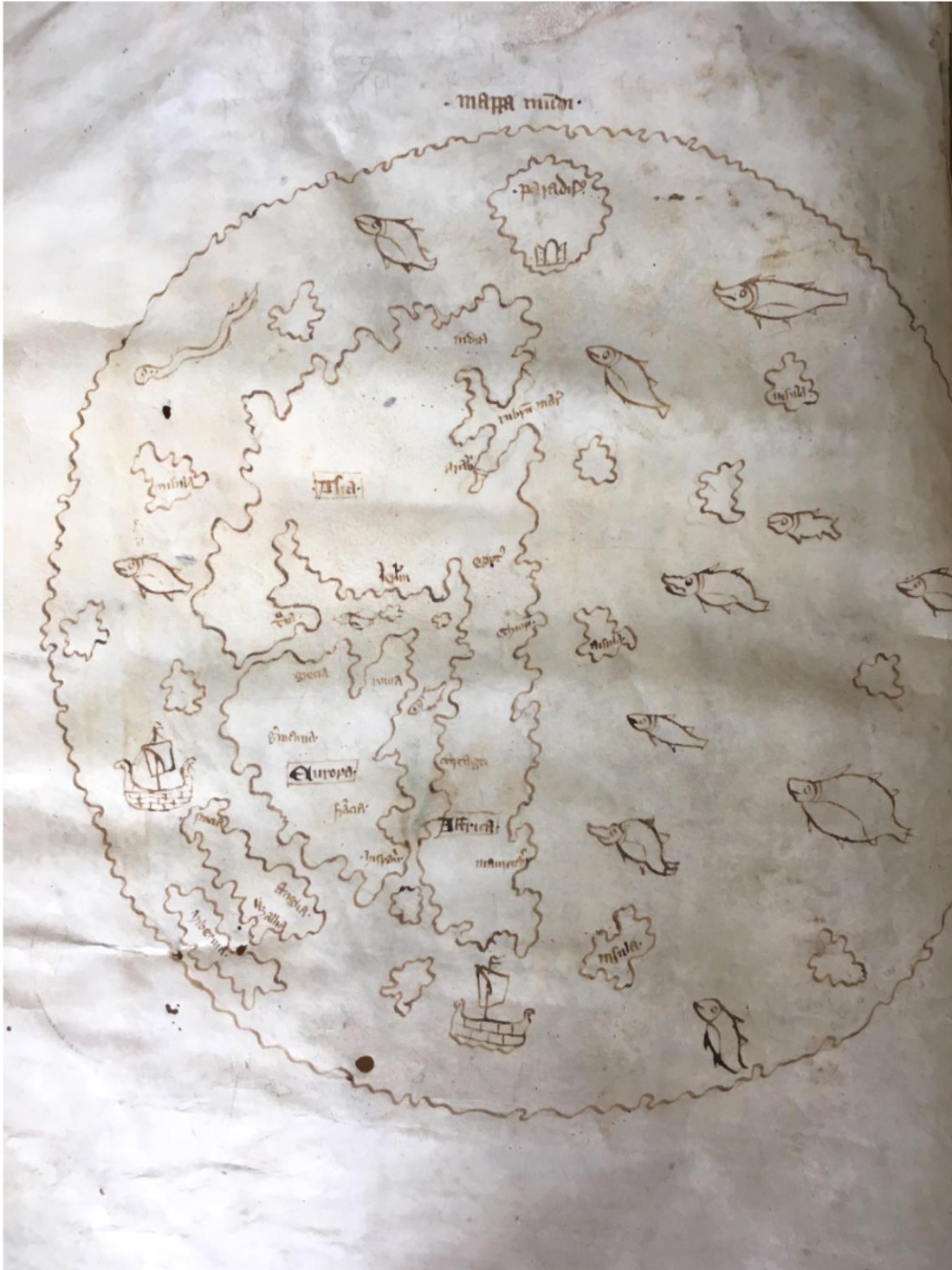
Godsond is not ignorant of his mark's power, and its placement at the centre is only part of how he drives home his own important role in producing the value of the manuscript. For Godsond's mark is not only at the centre of the folio that contains it but also at the centre of the image on its verso. If you look closely, you will see that Godsond's encircled 'P' lies within the shadow of a round circle, a shape that bleeds through from the other side of the page. When the reader turns the page, the image shows through the membrane, and the manuscript's world map becomes visible:



New College Library, Oxford, MS 274, ff. ii verso–iii recto

[\(To better show the bleed-through of the stationer's mark into the world map, click on the photograph above to access a moving image.\)](#)

⁸ Although not all statutes survive, many are in Strickland Gibson, *Statuta antiqua Universitatis oxoniensis* (Oxford, 1931).



Prefatory world map
New College Library, Oxford, MS 274, f. iii verso

Similarly, when one looks at the world map itself, Godsond's mark is very faintly visible through it. It lies in the centre of the world just near Jerusalem, the roundness of the mark echoing the roundness of the earth and centred firmly within it.

Stationers have many places they could put their marks. In other texts they lie off to the side. (And here I should note that there is a later pledge note at the end of MS 274 (on f. 197v), with the valuation of stationer John More, which is tucked off to the side.) But this placement of Godsond's mark feels deliberate and cheeky. By putting his mark and his price in the centre of the world, or at least on the reverse of it, Godsond reminds us of his own importance and, at the same time of the importance of the many other people—the donors, chest keepers, and other stationers—who made this whole system possible.

By the time Warder and Consobrinus took out their loans, there were well over a dozen chests in operation, and they had become the University's largest cash asset. Godsond might not have been at the centre of the world. But he was definitely at the centre of Oxford's financial infrastructure, and his marks offers a visible reminder of that fact.

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