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Episode 3 - Can we learn anything from a single manuscript leaf?

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The Book of Hours from [Episode 2!](#)

In this episode of "If Books Could Talk..." we explore the reverse of the question we asked in Episode 2. Episode 3 presents a case in which we are *not* examining a medieval manuscript that provides clues of missing leaves, but rather a single leaf that is missing its manuscript!

Deep in the vault of The University of Iowa Special Collections Library lie several leaves from a variety of medieval manuscripts. Are they valuable? Do they hold important information? If they could talk, I would ask them:

"What, if anything, can we learn from you, a single leaf?"

Watch the video here and read more about the manuscript below!



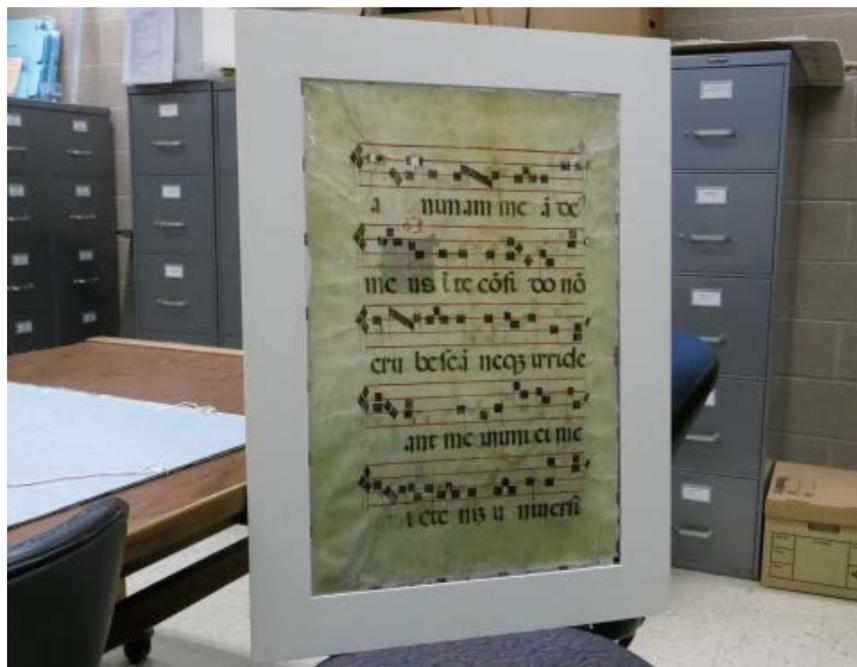
Episode 3's single leaf from a medieval gradual!

* Originally published in Omeka:
<http://thestudio.uiowa.edu/historycorps/exhibits/show/books/episode3>



BACKGROUND

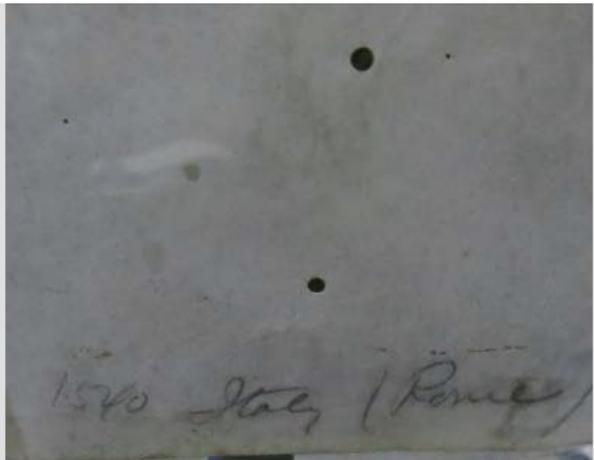
The leaf featured in this episode (Iowa City, The University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, xMMs.Gr2) once belonged to a medieval music manuscript known as a gradual. These important books, like antiphonals and missals, hold collections of chants performed during the multiple religious services of the Catholic Church that took place within a single day and throughout the liturgical year. Graduals differ from antiphonals and missals because they contain chants that are performed by a choir only, and only during mass. Antiphonals contain collections of chants sung during the Divine Offices, not mass; and missals contain all of the chants and texts that a priest, not a choir, used for the mass.



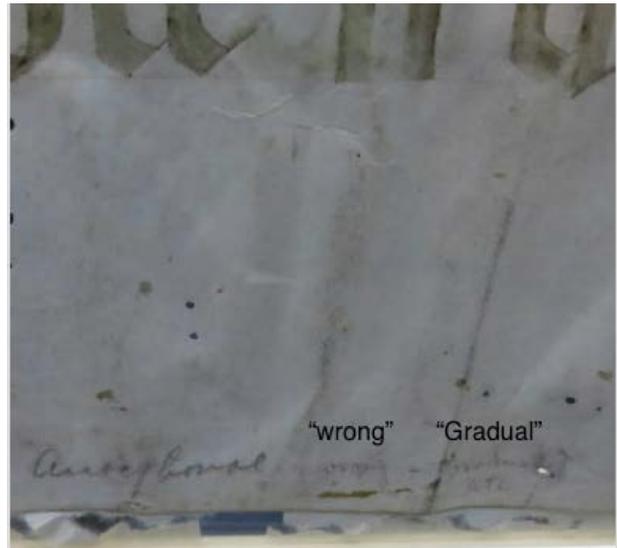
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When confronted with a single leaf of medieval music, a reader might easily be misled as to whether the leaf came from a gradual, antiphonal, missal or other because the same medieval chant may have been used at different times in both the mass and the divine services. Or more than one chant may begin with the same words and if the middle or end of the chant is missing, we cannot specify which chant it was, or for which service. Things can become complicated! What is interesting about this leaf is that we can see pencil writing on the bottom of the recto, which originally identified this leaf as part of a larger antiphonal: "1540, Italy (Rome) - antiphonal." But even more interesting is that a later researcher amended this with: "Wrong - gradual."

The date indicated in the pencil inscription (1540) may also need to be reconsidered. It was common practice with nineteenth- and twentieth-century booksellers to write this important information directly onto the leaves they had for sale. While these assessments are often accurate, they sometimes indicate a ballpark estimate only. Recent research techniques and technology can confirm or update the information left by earlier booksellers. Indeed, some clues found in this leaf might challenge the date of 1540.



Pencil inscription which states "1540, Italy/Rome"



Pencil inscription continues with: "Wrong - Gradual"

CLUE ONE - IT'S BIG!



Image from
<https://medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/size-matters-part-2-giant-medieval-manuscripts/>

So what can a single leaf tell us? Well, its size provides a first clue. This leaf, measuring 635 mm by 425 mm (25 inches tall by 16.75 inches wide) is far larger than all but one of the other manuscript leaves in The University of Iowa Special Collections. In fact this single leaf may have come from the entire skin of a small animal, such as a sheep. With this in mind, these books demanded large quantities of parchment and would have been more expensive to make than other smaller manuscripts.

Our research shows that these books, though perhaps expensive, may have still been cost-effective because they were not meant to belong to individual choir

members. Instead, one manuscript likely served for the entire choir. Images of choirs that appear in contemporary medieval manuscripts show how large books, such as graduals, were set on lecterns and the choir gathered around the one book. In order for everyone to be able to read the music and text, the manuscript needed to be in a large format. Thus the size of this single leaf provides important information about who used it!

CLUE 2 - THE MUSIC AND TEXT

While folio size helps us to understand that this manuscript was used by a choir, and not a single individual, choirs sang all kinds of chants from both the ordinary of the mass (the same text sung at every mass) and at the proper of the mass (different texts at every mass, dependent on the day of the liturgical year). The music and text from our specific leaf work together to tell us *which chant* it represents and thus *when* it was sung.

Which chant?



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By consulting reference materials such as the “Graduale Triplex” and the “Liber Usualis” we can identify which chant is featured on this folio. Our text, the “Ad te levavi,” is used in two medieval mass chants, both for the same day. The most famous is the introit “Ad te levavi” and second is the offertory chant “Ad te (domine) levavi.” The melody of our chant on this leaf matches that of the offertory chant and not the introit. Moreover, on the verso of our leaf the letters “Co,” appear at the beginning of the following chant, indicating that our “Ad te levavi” was followed directly by the “co”mmunion chant for that same mass. So we can confidently identify our chant as the “Ad te levavi...” the offertory chant sung during the mass.

Table 1: Sung chants of the Mass¹

Ordinary of the Mass	Proper of the Mass
	Introit
Kyrie	
Gloria	
	Gradual
	Alleluia (or Tract)
	Sequence
Credo	
	Offertory
Sanctus	
Agnus Dei	
	Communion
Ite, missa est	

1 Only the sung parts are given here, there are many additional spoken parts. Taken from J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 53.

The table above helps visualize the sequence of chants in a typical mass. The Offertory and the Communion chants are separated by the Sanctus and Agnus Dei chants of the Ordinary Mass. However, these two latter chants are missing from our leaf! Behold another clue as to the possible nature of our leaf's manuscript! It may be that this gradual only contained the chants for the Mass Proper and that the church or monastery that commissioned the manuscript had another more elaborate music book for the Mass Ordinary – one that may have included polyphonic chants! Polyphony, unlike the monophonic chants featured in our example, has more than one melodic line happening at the same time. Many composers in the Middle Ages set cycles of the Mass Ordinary in polyphony. One of the earliest examples we have of a polyphonic Mass Ordinary setting is Guillaume Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame* (ca. 1364).²

When was it sung?



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Identifying the chant on our leaf also tells us that it was sung on first day of the liturgical year in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Mass, i.e. the first Sunday of Advent. This information in turn sheds light on a puzzling mark that appears in the very right-hand margin of the recto side of our leaf, part of which was cut off when the manuscript was cropped for a later binding. For large format manuscripts in the Middle Ages, the folio numbers were often placed in the middle of right margin. The partial mark on our leaf appears in exactly that spot, and is

2 Oxford Camerata, Guillaume Machaut. *Messe de Nostre Dame*. Youtube recording. March 3, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvIEA2dBKGA>. Other notable Mass Ordinary settings include: Guillaume DuFay's c. 1460 *Missa l'Homme Arme*. Berrkeley Chamber Singers. Youtube recording. January 31, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kigTCBCF33k>. Johannes Ockeghem's ca 1450-1500 *Missa Prolationum*. Cappella Nova, Johannes Ockeghem. *Missa Prolationum*. Youtube recording. July 4, 2013 (1978). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-gGwzFLFKI>. Josquin Desprez's ca. 1515 *Missa Pange Lingua*. Tallis Scholars, Josquin Desprez. *Missa Pange Lingua*. Youtube recording. June 15, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1B1HR4BgUg>. And Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's ca 1567 *Missa Papae Marcelli*. Tallis Scholars, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. *Missa Papae Marcelli*. Youtube recording. January 6, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRfF7W4El60>.

rubricated or written in red ink. Could it be an indication as to the folio number for our leaf? Indeed, it is. Since we now know that the chant on this folio was sung at the beginning of the liturgical year, it makes sense that it would appear somewhere at the beginning of the manuscript as well. The unidentified red mark represents the half of a roman numeral “i,” and we can safely say it is not folio “i” since the chant on our folio carries on from a previous page. Thus our leaf was likely folio “ii”, “iii” or “iv” of a much larger manuscript! Very cool!

What about the date?



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The text and musical notation provide information about the date of our leaf as well. The script used to write the text suggests an earlier date from perhaps the late 15th century, rather than the 1540 written in pencil at the bottom of the recto. That the bookseller’s first assessment misclassified the type of music manuscript gives cause to perhaps reconsider the date given as well. A 15th century hypothesis is supported by the nature of the musical notation. The four-line red staves, the black square notes, and the way the clefs are written indicate later 15th century, rather than 16th century. These conclusions remain hypotheses only because music manuscripts are difficult to date within a narrow time frame and musical notation varied not only by date but also by region. Moreover

our folio has not been identified as originating from a specific manuscript that carries a verified date. Despite being circumstantial, the evidence from our leaf leads us to believe that this manuscript was probably written earlier than 1540, perhaps the latter 15th century.

When it comes to medieval music manuscripts, the music and text together provide some of the most important information, especially when only a single leaf remains.

Now we know what chant was written on this folio, when it was sung, what it sounded like and the likely date when a scribe set to work on this beautiful piece of parchment.

CLUE 3 - THE DECORATED CAPITAL

A third clue that appears on our single leaf of a larger gradual is an illuminated letter "D." This capital introduced the communion chant for the first Sunday of Advent, a chant that followed the "Ad te levavi..." discussed above. Upon first glance, the absolute beauty of this illumination, with colors and stylized leaf motif indicating Italian origin, suggests that perhaps this manuscript was used for display only.

The presence of gold leaf may perhaps indicate the gift of a noble family or a wealthy patron in exchange for prayers to be said after his/her/their death(s). Or perhaps the church created it from its own scriptorium for a special occasion? Perhaps it was displayed rarely, only at moments when the church wanted to flaunt its wealth and status?



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Of interest however are at least three musical notes that provide information about the function of this leaf, and thus the manuscript as a whole. These particular notes were squeezed in after the leaf, if not the entire manuscript, had been finished. Their diminished size, in comparison with the other notes on the same page, indicate that emendations and/or corrections were made. Frequently these changes were made to create a more accurate version of the melody, but in this case, these three notes actually make the sequence of notes less accurate when compared to the "official" version in the "Liber Usualis." In so doing, these notes provide significant evidence that a choir was meant to read the music on this leaf when singing mass on the first Sunday of Advent.

Thus, the decorated capital served a purpose other than displaying status only. While its beauty may have served to inspire the choir when singing, or even perhaps impress the congregation who sat nearby, it remains that this single gradual leaf tells us that its manuscript was a *working* document.

CONCLUSION



While the mostly-complete Book of Hours from Episode 2 provided clues for a better understanding of what was missing, the reverse is true for this single folio from a medieval gradual. This one leaf, one of at least one hundred plus folios, tells us so much about which type of manuscript it

came from, when it was sung, where it was sung, who sang it, and how it was used. It also offers evidence about when and where the manuscript was likely made.

But the most revealing of all ... this single folio not only talks, IT SINGS! 🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵

If you close your eyes and imagine yourself in a medieval church, one of a small-numbered choir... can you hear it? The folio comes alive!

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