

Via handwriting analysis, scholar discovers unknown Magna Carta scribe

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Literary scholar Elaine Treharne painstakingly examined every letter and punctuation mark of the Salisbury Magna Carta in making her discovery about the document's origin. Credit: L.A. Cicero

Eight hundred years ago, one of the world's most important documents was born. Issued by King John of England in 1215, the Magna Carta ("Great Charter") acknowledged the rights of citizens and set restrictions on the power of the king. The Magna Carta has influenced the structures of modern democracies, including the writ of habeas corpus of the U.S. Constitution.

Thanks to meticulous comparative handwriting analysis, Stanford

literary scholar Elaine Treharne has uncovered new information about who wrote one of the last four surviving original versions of the 1215 Magna Carta, preserved at England's Salisbury Cathedral.

Scholars have long thought that the Magna Carta was issued by the king in the Chancery, the king's central court, written by his scribes there and then sent out to other locations in the shires, or counties, of England.

According to Treharne, her research suggests the Salisbury Magna Carta was not just received and preserved at Salisbury, but that the Salisbury Magna Carta was written at Salisbury by one of the cathedral's own scribes. She recently co-published her findings with University of Glasgow historian Andrew Prescott.

Treharne, a professor of English at Stanford, says that knowing about this difference in authorship "changes the way we think about the transmission of texts in the Middle Ages from the court."

Instead of the charter being something passive that the king produced and sent out from the central court to be put away in satellite locations, Treharne says versions of the charter "were written in the regions and then taken to the court for sealing by the king's Great Seal."

This reconfiguration of the Magna Carta's path signals "a much more proactive relationship between institutions and king," the scholar says. "It makes us look again at the role of the church in relationship to the king. They become much more partners, really, in the production of texts."

Painstaking work

Treharne made the unexpected discovery while working on a larger project profiling the rich archive of Salisbury Cathedral. She was

analyzing texts in a book that belonged to Salisbury in about 1215 or 1220 when she noticed "that a couple of the scribes' work in that book looked very similar to that of the Magna Carta scribe."

In particular, she noted similarities in the handwriting of the Salisbury Magna Carta and a document called the Register of St. Osmund, which contains regulations, charters, writs and other documents pertaining to the cathedral.

Through her work on the Salisbury archive and other long-term projects such as Stanford's initiative Text Technologies, Treharne pursues her fascination with the history of documents and the development of texts and handwriting from the Middle Ages to today's digital texts.

The archive at Salisbury has not been digitized, so Treharne has been traveling there from Stanford for several years to examine the documents firsthand.

The scholar says she first noticed similarities between the Register of St. Osmund and the Salisbury Magna Carta through her overall visual impression of the manuscripts. Then, she says, came the most painstaking part of the process: the "accumulation of proof" through a meticulous, letter-by-letter handwriting comparison.

"You would truly begin with an 'a,' and look at the 'a,' and the way that it was formed with a pen, and then move to the 'a' of the other document and look at the 'a' there."

Treharne proceeded to do the same for the whole alphabet in lower case and upper case. She says she then examined the punctuation, abbreviation, "the angle of the pen and the number of strokes for each character. So it's really incredibly painstaking work."

Treharne explains that just like our handwriting is particular to each of us, medieval scribes wrote particular letters in ways that were "absolutely specific" to each scribe.

In the case of the Magna Carta and Register of St. Osmund, she has identified at least four "remarkable letter-forms," including a particularly noteworthy 'g' with a "looped tail," that point to the handwriting of one person – a Salisbury scribe.

The importance of access

Treharne's work is a testament to how sometimes big discoveries can come unexpectedly from the pull of scholarly curiosity and from nurturing a fertile field of research.

"I didn't set out to find anything out – I just thought it was quite interesting to look at the hand of the Magna Carta scribe," she said. "But it struck me really forcefully when I first saw this Register of St. Osmund. When I opened it I thought, goodness, that really looks like the Magna Carta scribe."

Treharne emphasizes that discoveries like these highlight the importance of both preservation and access. Her work on the Magna Carta is now part of the larger book she has been writing, *Collective Memories in Salisbury Cathedral Library and Archive, 1200-1800*.

The scholar says the history of the Salisbury archive is "an incredible story of collecting and preserving and producing, and actually protecting."

For example, Treharne says, "When the Reformation came they had a public book burning and a lot of the Salisbury books appeared to have been lost. But somehow they managed to save stuff that they should've

had to get rid of."

Treharne says this project shows the benefits of collaboration. She has been working with Prescott, who focuses on the historical aspects of the findings, and other scholars in the UK. Their findings are additionally confirmed by different evidence from research being done on the Magna Carta by historians David Carpenter (King's College London) and Nicholas Vincent (University of East Anglia).

Treharne says the findings also show the value of keeping an open mind in scholarship. "Although we think we know so much about history, we know so much about people of the past, we know so much about our institutions, all the time scholars and interested citizens are making amazing discoveries."

More information: "The Origin and Context of the Salisbury Magna Carta." [historyoftexttechnologies.blog ... xt-of-salisbury.html](http://historyoftexttechnologies.blog...xt-of-salisbury.html)

Provided by Stanford University

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