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# TIL OPPLYSNING

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## **OLD HANDWRITING – some examples**

Monica Aase

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## ***Introduction***

Why man wrote, how man wrote, and what man wrote on and with have not really changed very much over time. Man has always used a type of material on which one could write the information one wanted to convey. This material could be stone, wood, leather, parchment (i.e. skin), or paper. At first, man carved symbols, but later on different forms of ink or other fluid substances that dried after a given time came into use. It was not until recent decades that we have been able to type something on an electronic medium, and either print it or send it as electronic post. Nor is graffiti something new. In Pompei, for example, excavations uncovered political propaganda carved on the walls.

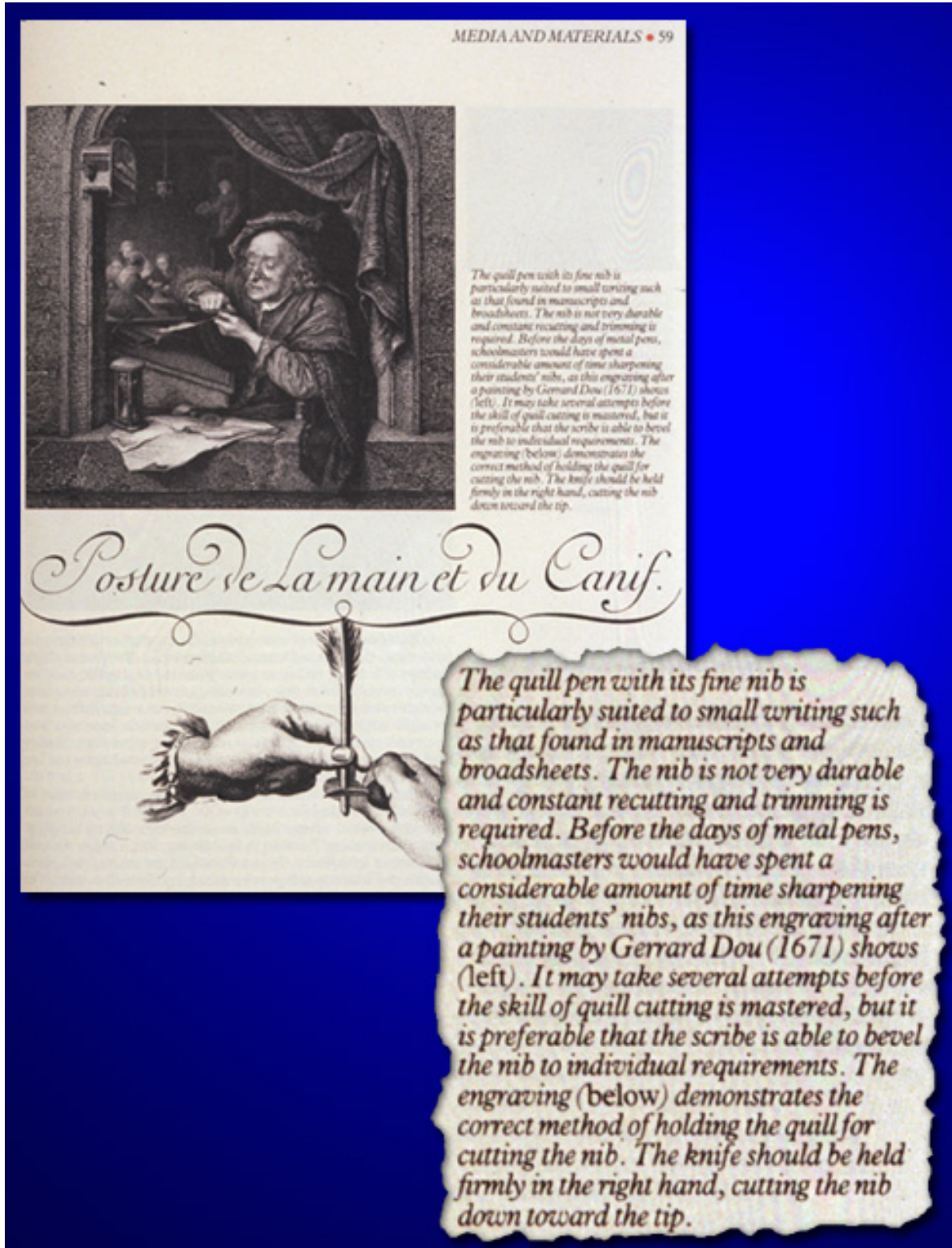
The oldest remains of writing have been found in a town in ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq). There, writing developed at the same time as trade became geographically more widespread and the production of crafts became more specialized and standardized: 'memos' were needed to register the amount of trade and what type of wares were traded. However, there are other reasons why man needed writing. For instance, it could have been that man wrote letters when he wanted to recount something, especially over long distances.

Writing was also a means to relate a story that one wanted to live on through many generations. From experience we know that oral traditions are not sufficiently reliable, as was the case for the Icelandic Sagas, for example. Further, one can use writing to draft a document concerning something that two parties need to agree on. Then either party will be able to look back and see what was decided upon originally. This can be in the form of legal texts, contracts and testaments, for example. Writing can also be used for surveys and registers. For instance, several centuries ago it was important to document which men had fallen in battle – which manors no longer had a lord. The first census in Norway was made in the mid-17th century, when only men were listed. This was only carried out in order to find out how many armed men were available in the kingdom.

It was not usual for people in the Middle Ages to be able to read and write. It was estimated that only 10% of the population in the Netherlands and France were able to read in the late Middle Ages. In a country such as Norway the percentage was undoubtedly lower. In our country, books and writing were introduced at the same time as Christianity. Although runes had existed before Christianity they were only used for short inscriptions. In Norway, the first use of writing was in the Church, and then it gradually came into use in wider society for various practical matters, such as administration, legal matters, legislation, and for buying and selling. To be able to write accorded prestige. In 1591 Norway introduced stipendiary magistrates, i.e. authorized writers who put down in writing that which was agreed upon.

## Teaching and writing tools

The illustration shows a teacher who is busy sharpening quill pens for his pupils. This had to be done often, since the pens quickly became unusable. It was said that the finest pens were made from the wing feathers of geese, but it had to be the left wing, so that the pen would bend the right way for those who were right-handed.



*Interior view of a classroom*

In the Middle Ages the art of writing was mastered first and foremost in the monasteries. Here, they produced books, especially transcriptions of the Bible. It was in the monasteries too that the most lavish books were produced. Very often they had decoration, either in the initial letters which framed the text or in another form, i.e. the so-called illuminated texts.

### ***The monk's work in the monasteries***

Those who have seen the film 'The Name of the Rose' (based on the book by Umberto Eco), may recall the writing room in the monastery and those who worked there. It is not difficult to imagine how cold it must have been and how poor the daylight was – only tallow candlelight was available. The monks wrote on parchment, since paper did not come into use until later. Skin was expensive and if a mistake was made, the letters were scraped away and rewritten. This use of skin was not unusual, and there was even a word for such effaced skin: palimpsest. By using different methods – in recent years with the help of electron microscopes – it is possible to read the original text (see also 'Forged diplomas' below). Many important examples of ancient handwriting have been analysed using this method.



*A monk at work in a writing room*

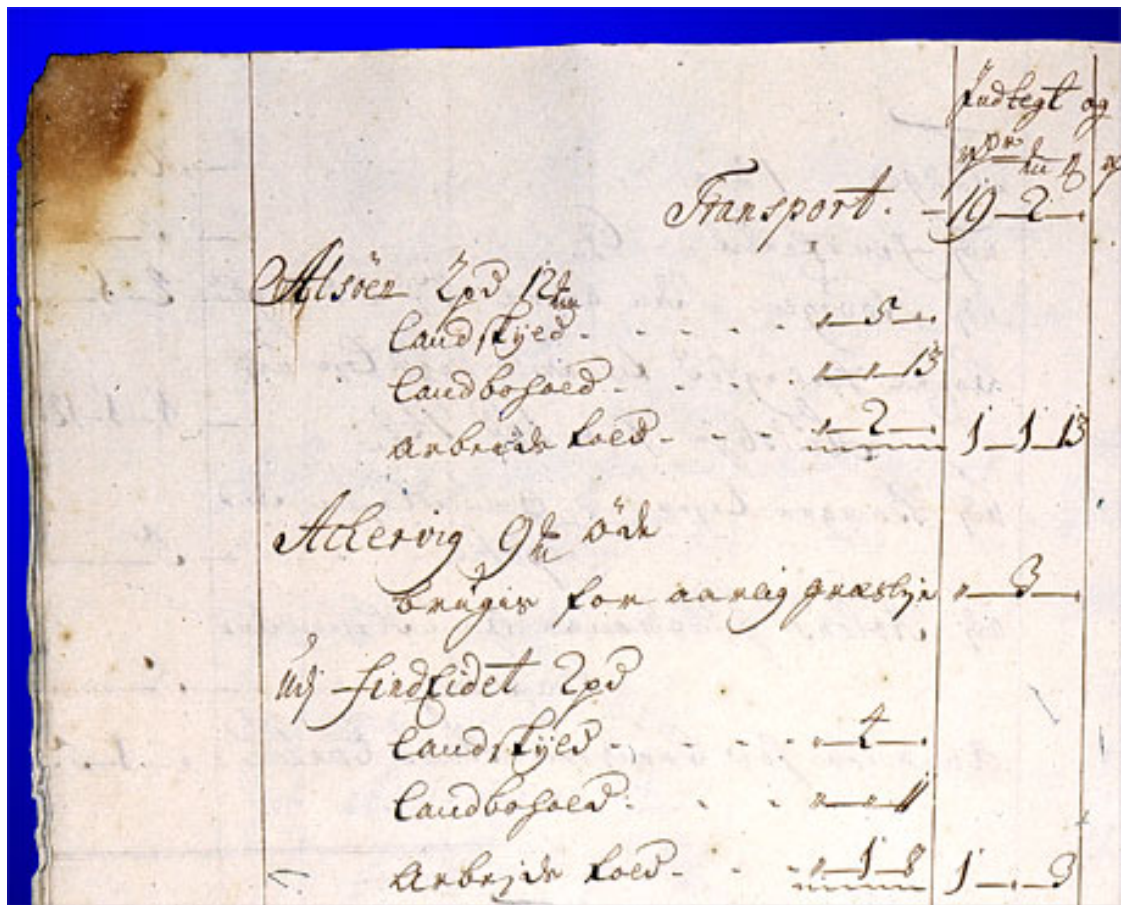
Paper first came into use in Norway at the end of the 15th century. In the early Middle Ages men wrote on parchment, i.e. finely treated skin from a calf, kid, or other animal. Parchment was very expensive and even small pieces were made use of. Also, many abbreviations were used, which those able to read did not have problems understanding then, though which today's readers have to spend

some time on. For example, if the letter 'm' had a line above it, it indicated a double letter, 'mm'. Information on measures, weights and other matters were also abbreviated so that the text could be reduced to a minimum. In some examples the skin has holes – perhaps caused by an insect at the time when the animal, from which the parchment was made from, was alive – and in such cases the writing was often carefully done around the hole.

### **Wide-spaced writing – and close-spaced**

The picture below shows a page of a text by Ole Arnoldisøn Tønder, who died in April 1728 in Dublin. It is part of the Coldevinske inventory from Dønnes, which is preserved in the Gunnerus Library. The document is signed by the stipendiary magistrate in Helgeland shire, Søren Dass. It can be seen that the document is written in very wide-spaced writing. This was often the case when the writer was paid per written page. Conversely, it is possible to find examples of thin and cramped writing, as happened when the writer had to pay for pen and ink himself.

In some instances another form of saving can be seen: in the 19th century people sometimes used a special way of writing letters. First they wrote horizontally, then they turned the paper 90 degrees and continued to write across the existing writing.

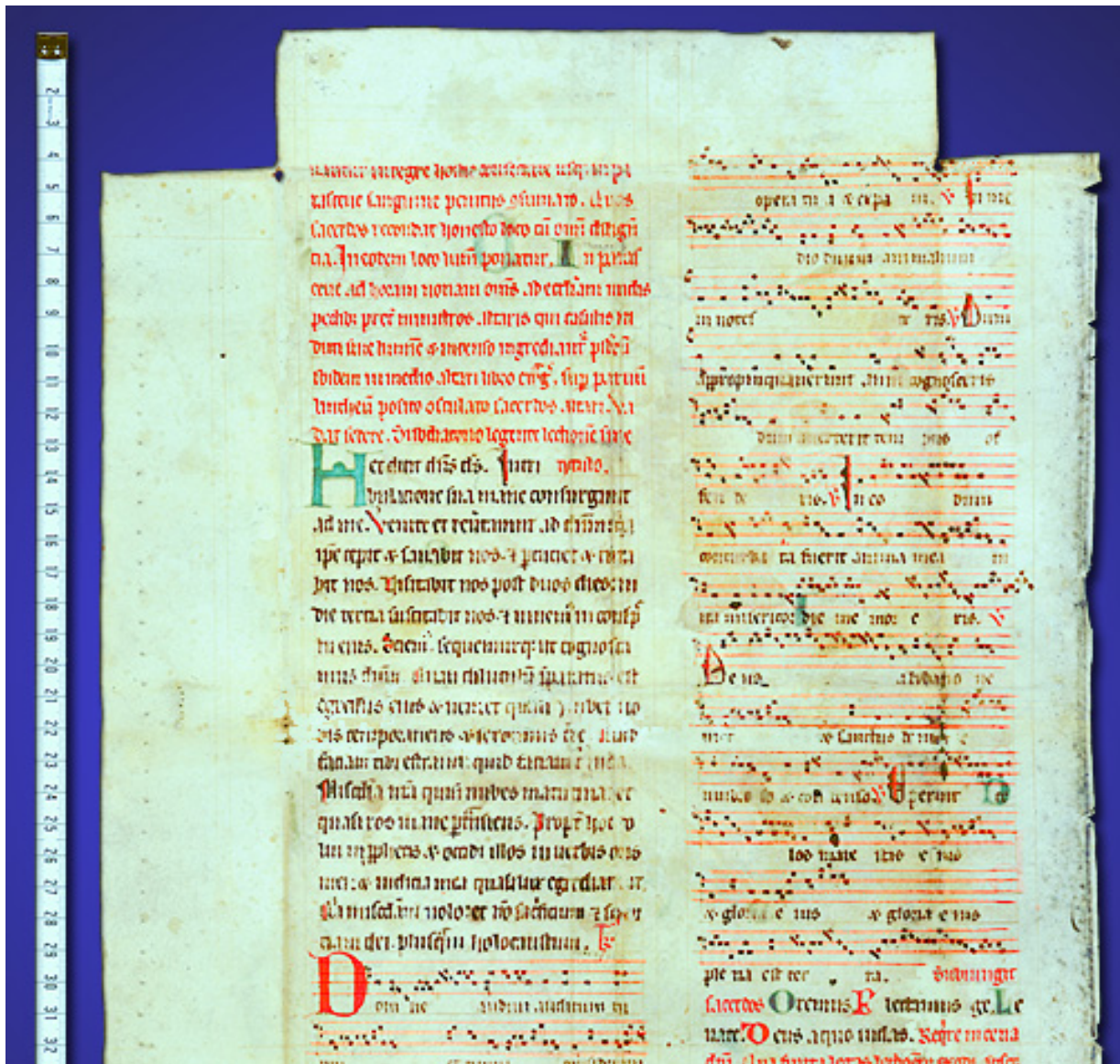


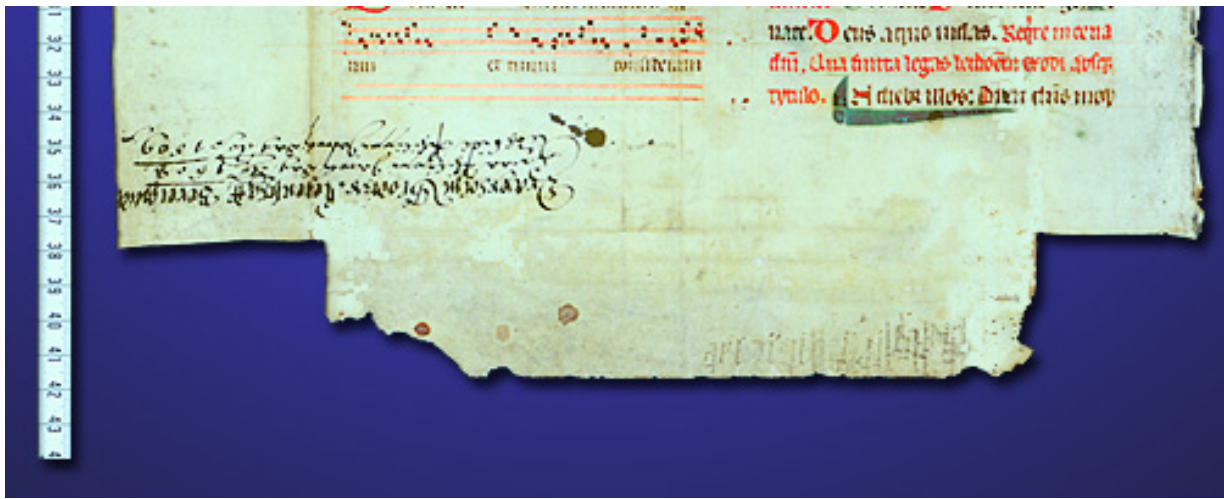
Wide-spaced writing

### **Fragments**

When the Reformation took place in Norway in 1537, the Catholic mass texts were no longer used. As already mentioned, parchment was a very costly material and one which could be reused. Therefore, documents were often cut up and the skin used for different purposes, such as book binding, strengthening book spines, and binding accounts, to mention a few.

Over large parts of Europe, there is now systematic registering of parchment fragments. One such registration program has been developed at the State Archives (Riksarkivet) in Stockholm and this is also used at the NTNU Library in Trondheim. Registering is done in German, since it is anticipated that the Library will put its registered fragments, together with pictures and text, onto the Internet. The database will be interactive, so that researchers will be able to comment upon the information held on it. At the NTNU Library, Gunnerus Library, there are c. 100 documents which will be registered with information on their dating and language, and eventually music scores and other types of information will be added. DNA analysis is undertaken by a research institute to compare the profiles of the skin on which the texts are written, in order to find out if any two fragments belong together.





*Fragment from 14th or 15th century*



*Book bound in music score fragment*

### ***Codex argenteus***

One of the world's greatest handwriting treasures is the Codex argenteus, or Silver Bible as it is known in Sweden. This is preserved at the University Library in Uppsala, Carolina Rediviva. Few books have such a distinctive history as this treasure. It has passed through countless hands, has been bought, sold, stolen, and looted, and has been subject to detailed investigation, photography and analysis.

The Silver Bible's history begins with an attack by plunderers in AD 264, according to the church historian Filostorgius. At that time, a horde of blond warriors captured part of the population in Cappadocia (now Turkey) and carried them away as slaves. The thieves were Visigoths and they took their captives with them to a settlement north of the Danube. Among the slaves was a girl of Christian faith. She married one of the Visigoths and gave birth to a son in 311, whom she named Wulfila, 'Little Wolf'. Wulfila showed early signs of being gifted in language, and while he was still young he had the chance to help with the religious services. Later he went to Emperor Constantine's court in Constantinople and became appointed bishop. Wulfila assembled the Christian Goths and went over the Danube into that what is now Bulgaria. Here he carried out his life's work: he translated the Bible into Gothic. It was a very difficult task because the Goths did not have a written language. Certainly runes existed, but they were only used in connection with black magic. Wulfila made a Gothic alphabet based on the Greek alphabet, but also used some of the Gothic runes. The vocabulary was also a problem. In Gothic there are many words for 'fight' and 'hunt' but naturally enough, none for 'reading'. Wulfila created new words and concepts. The laborious translation work took many years. In 380 the work was completed, with the exception of Kings I and II. Wulfila's original Bible translation is now lost, and only one of the oldest transcriptions is left, which is known as the Codex argenteus. This handwritten text, which can be dated to the 6th century, contains only parts of the four Gospels. In all likelihood, this copy was produced at the court of Theodoric the Great, in Ravenna in North Italy.

The Silver Bible was written on purple-coloured (i.e. red-coloured) parchment. This colour was reserved for high-ranking people in society. It is estimated that c. 300 calf skins were used to make the Bible. The first row of each chapter was written in gold ink, but otherwise silver ink was used. As can be seen, the leaves are decorated at the foot with the names of the four evangelists appearing in arches supported by a row of columns. The order is: Matthew, John, Luke and Mark, the same order as in the ancient Latin scriptures.

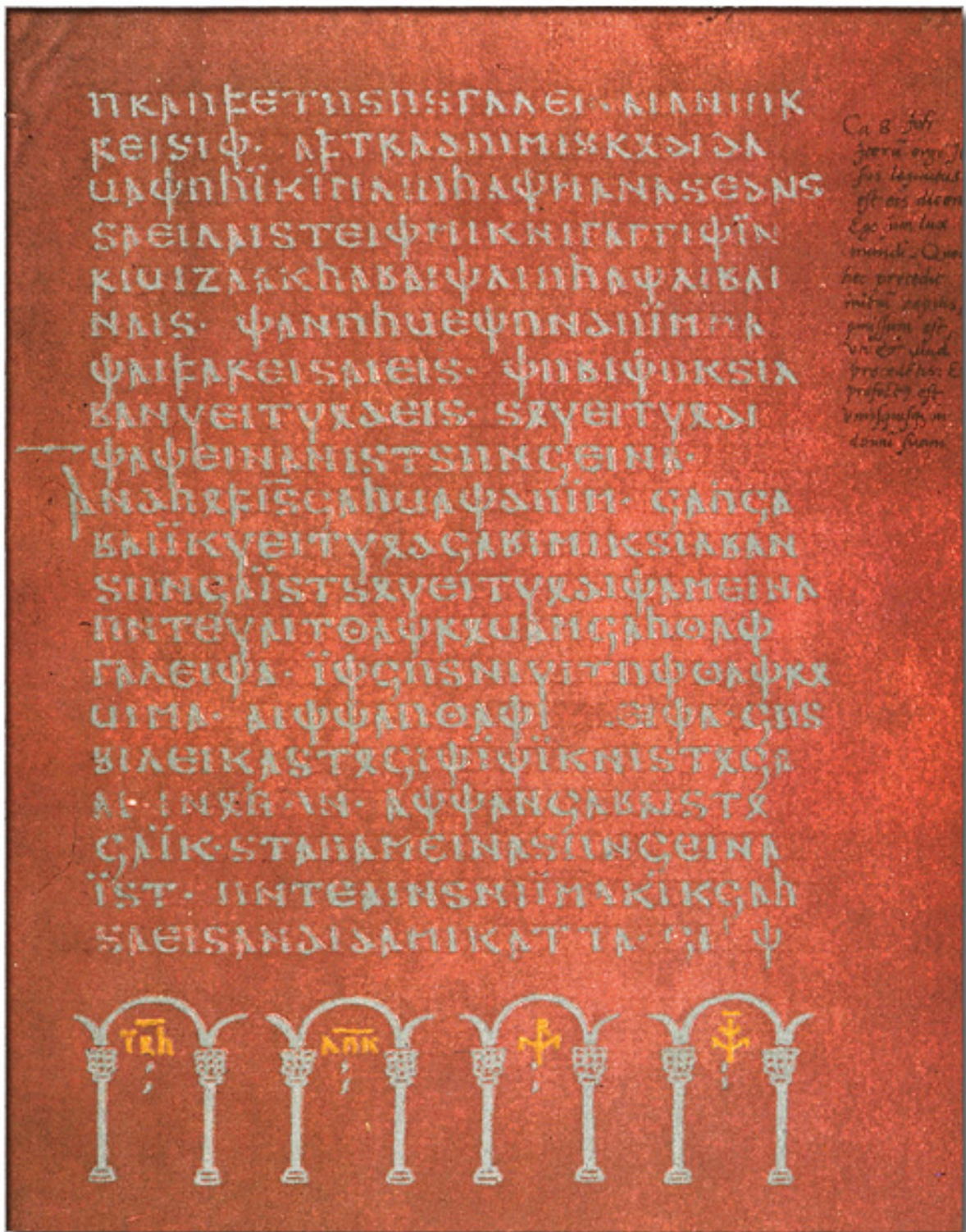
The writing had a very varied existence. It finally ended up in Hradcany Castle in Prague, from where it was stolen by the Swedes in 1648. It was then donated by Magnus de la Gardie to the Carolina Rediviva library, and he had it bound in magnificent silver covers, hence the name.

The Codex argenteus consists of 87 parchment leaves with parts of the four Gospels. In 1927 a facsimile of the book was published. Unfortunately a number of the leaves in the original were bleached, but with the help of reflected ultraviolet light it is possible to render the original text visible again.

In March 1998 a C-14 analysis of material from the Silver Bible was undertaken to answer a number of questions: How old is the Bible? Are there any traces left of the original binding? Are there any traces of the binding dating from the Middle Ages? The results showed that the book dates from before AD 550, just as presumed. The book was not rebound when it gained its silver fittings. The



binding dates from the 16th century, possibly from the late 15th century.



Page from the Silver Bible

### **Book of Kells**

The first great personality to emerge from the darkness of the early Middle Ages, Charles the Great (emperor from AD 800) was able to read, but not write. It is said that he had a writing tablet by the side of his bed to practice on, but that he never really mastered the art of writing.

At this time, the Celtic culture was flourishing in Ireland. There were few places where the transcriptions of the Gospels were so beautifully decorated as in the North of England and Ireland and it was in that area that the so-called insular style was developed. The style was influenced by Byzantine, Italian and Saxon art, but the greatest influence was that which the Celts brought with them when they came to Ireland in pre-Christian times. The pre-Christian culture blended together with the Christian, and the ornamentation which the Celts were skilled at was then used in decorating, for example, handwriting. The Book of Kells is a remarkable example of this. There are many monasteries which produced such ornamented books to be found in Ireland.

During the Scandinavian raids in the 9th and 10th centuries it was more than likely that a considerable number of books were destroyed. However, of those which were not lost was the Book of Kells, often described as the world's most beautiful book. It was written c. AD 800. In fact, it is a wonder that the book still exists, since the Abbey of Kells, where it was preserved, was plundered at least seven times before 1006. That year the book went missing for three months. When it turned up again, the gold cover, which was inlaid with precious stones, was gone.

The book or the set of books, for it is bound in 4 volumes, is preserved in Trinity College, Dublin, where it is displayed in a glass case. The Book of Kells contains the four Gospels. It consists of 339 parchment leaves made of calf skin. Each day a page is turned. This treasure is preserved under very strong guard and in a protective microclimate. In connection with the book display there is also a large exhibition relating to the book and its history. Several artists contributed to illustrating the work. The artists had evidently enjoyed painting the animals as decorations; there is a multitude of snakes, squirrels, fish, and other animals. Luke Chapter 15 even begins with a depiction of a fight between different creatures! That it is symbolic is without doubt, but the symbol's language is not readily understandable for today's readers.

The most beautiful page is that which is known as Chi-Rho, named after the Greek letters XP, i.e. Ch[ristos]. XRI B GENERATIO, i.e. Christi autem generatio, are the opening words in the Gospel of St Matthew. Examples of almost all types of Celtic decorative art are to be found here. This page is also known as 'the Monogram Page'. There are crabs, flowers, insects, rabbits, and much more. Many good facsimilies of the Book of Kells have been produced.







*From the Book of Kells. Note all the details in the text and illumination (decoration)*

### ***Magnus Lagabøter's National Code***

Magnus Lagabøter was king in Norway during the period 1263–1280. He acquired his nickname, 'the Law Improver', for his great service in his work on the

country's legislation. After the law for Borgarting, Eidsivating and Gulating had been revised, the work was expanded during the revision of Frostating's Law to include the whole of Norway. In order to prevent future disputes over the throne, a decision was introduced into the country's legislation that no division of the kingdom may occur, but instead that it should be inherited by the king's eldest son born in wedlock. During the period 1274–1276 this National Code was adopted in the four regions.

A town law, which was passed for Bergen at the same time (1276), was subsequently introduced in Norway's remaining towns.

Of Magnus Lagabøter's National Code there is only a fragment remaining, a transcription dating from the period 1325–1350.





*Transcription of Magnus Lagabøter's National Code, dating from 1325–1350.  
The picture shows the King delivering his Law to the people*

### **Diplomas**

By diploma is meant, in simple terms, a document from the Middle Ages which formed an agreement between two parties. This could have been a testament, sale of a piece of land, or something else. In Norway there are c. 40,000 diplomas, most of them preserved in the State Archives, in Oslo. According to Norwegian law, all handwritten material dating from before 1537, i.e. when the Reformation took place in Norway, belongs to this archive. The State Archives is in the process of carrying out digital registration of Norwegian diplomas dating from before 1570. See:

[http://www.dokpro.uio.no/dipl\\_norv/diplom\\_felt.html](http://www.dokpro.uio.no/dipl_norv/diplom_felt.html)

Diplomas were prepared by those few who were able to write. Ordinary people could not even write their name, so wax seals were used to make a document legal. The seals were often attached to documents with seal straps, as the handwritten documents were usually torn into pieces.

As already mentioned, there were not very many who were able to write in the Middle Ages. The photograph below shows Lady Inger Ottesdatter's letter of 11th June 1534, with an account of what the Archbishop owed her in compensation. There is reason to believe that Lady Inger of Austrått was able to write, but this document was presumably prepared for her by a writer in her service.



*Lady Inger's diploma*

### **Forged diplomas**

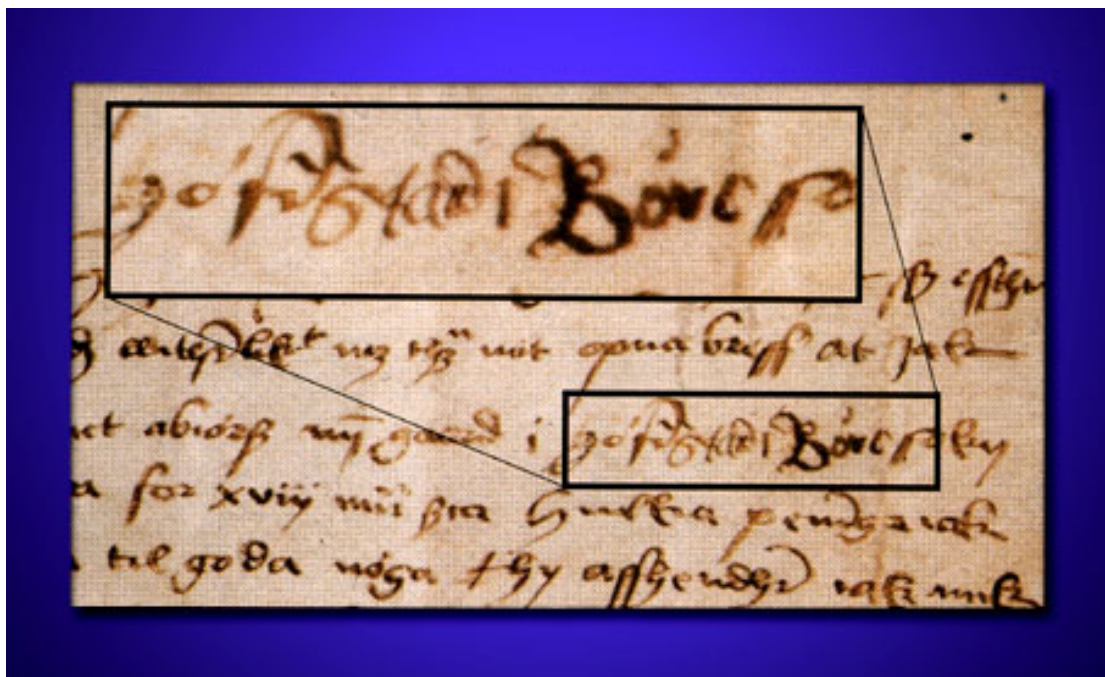
The King of Sweden was accused of falsifying Pope Coelestin III's letter in order to escape excommunication. Such forgeries have appeared throughout time over the whole world. However, in a time when people were not able to read or write, such falsified documents were only uncovered in exceptional circumstances.

Today, it is not only possible to reveal a forgery with the help of technical analysis, falsification can also be demonstrated when it is evident that the writer has not mastered the finer points of language, history and paleography that were current at the time indicated by the dating. The Swedish sales contract below appears authentic, but has long been known to be a forgery. The name to the upper right on the document is suspicious, since the skin shows signs of having been scraped. The owner of the document approached the State Criminal Technical Laboratory in Linköping, Sweden, where a technique known as micro-x-ray fluorescence was used. This technique was first used in police investigations, for example, in attempts to find microscopic remains of gunpowder. Only the smallest traces of the scraped-off ink are needed in order to reveal the original text. By using this method on the Swedish diploma, it was possible to expose the underlying text. It revealed that the name Gämesta was replaced with the name Böttinge.





Forged diploma



Part of a diploma showing falsification

### Neumes

In Western Europe in the Middle Ages, neumes were used to express musical notes. From c. AD 1000 onwards people began to write the neumes 'diastematically', i.e. in intervals. Subsequently, the neumes were placed above or below pitch determining horizontal lines. Often the pages of notes were written

in large format, so that all the members of the choir could read them when the page was held up. They may have looked slightly different originally, but here is an example of neumes that were especially used on the continent. On the beautiful handwritten example below, one can see that the artist has depicted himself in the work. His wife is bringing him beer to drink. This handwriting is preserved in Württembergische Landesbibliothek in Stuttgart.

**I**n q̄ sibi laus est eterna. *Ad summa missa; Sequi.*  
*bñ notkeri mōchi sancti*  
*galli dpositivi sequi nae*

**A**nus ante secula dei filius inuisi-  
 bilis interminus **P**er quē  
 fit machina celi et terre maris et in hys degen-  
 au **P**er quē dies et hore labāt et se iterū re-  
 ciprocant **Q**uē angeli in arte poli voce cō-  
 sona semp canūt **H**ic corpus assumpsit  
 fragile sine labe originalis criminis de carne  
 marie uirginis quo primi patris culpā eue-  
 lasauā tergeret **H**oc presens dicula loq̄

M·D·XII

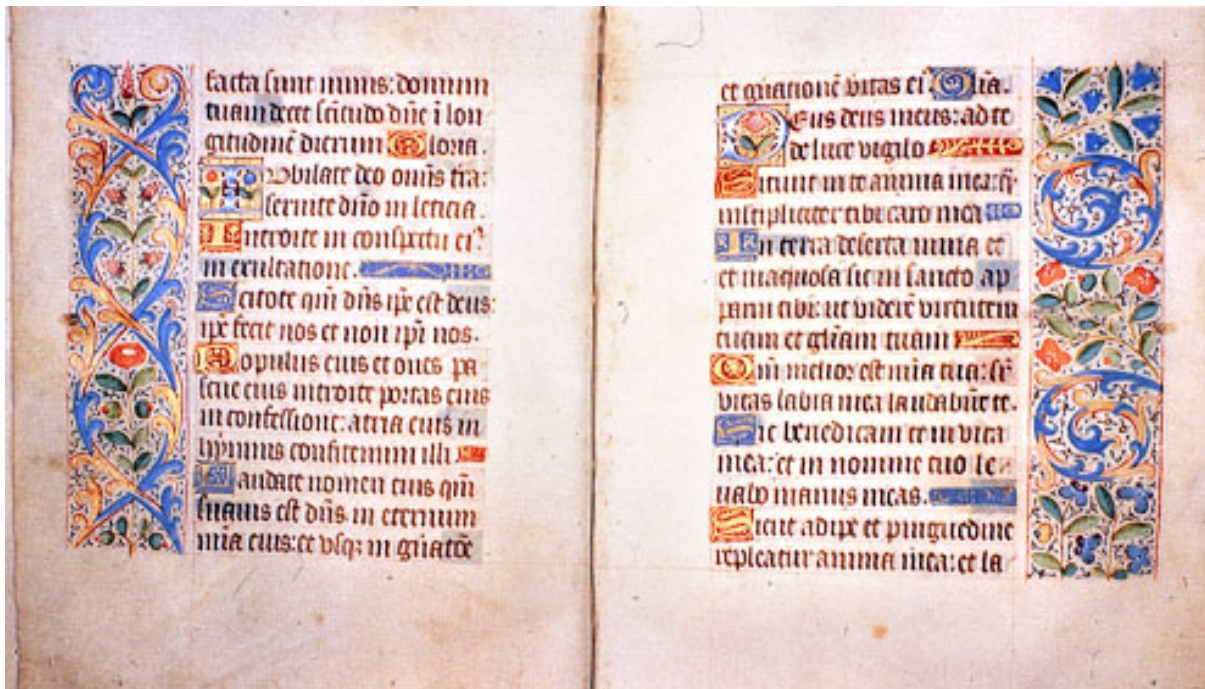
*Handwritten note at the bottom: 'Handwritten note: ...' (partially illegible)*



Neumes

### ***Sigrid Undset's prayer book from the 15th century***

At the NTNU Library in Trondheim, Gunnerus Library, the oldest and most important part of Sigrid Undset's book collection is preserved, including her own *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, with notes in the margin. Presumably, she used this when she wrote her novels, especially the work on *Kristin Lavransdatter*. In addition, the Library owns her prayer book, a so-called Book of Hours, which is thought to have been written in the 15th century. The material is parchment and the writing is in Latin. The book is richly illuminated, but the decoration on the last pages is not completed.



The prayer book

### ***Passport***

This is a very special document which is owned by the Gunnerus Library. It can be likened to today's passport. The document has belonged to a person who was to travel in Europe in the 17th century. Since it was risky to travel along the roads at that time, the traveller had asked a prince to write a 'certificate' describing his ancestors and how he was a high-ranking person who was to be treated well wherever he went. The traveller's ancestors are named in the document. Prince Bogislav, who has signed the document, participated in the Thirty Year's War. Thus, he can hardly have written the Latin text himself, which is apparent from comparing the text and the signature. The document was signed in 1634.



Passport with Bogislav's signature



Bogislav's signature, enlarged

### Cadasters

A cadaster is a special inventory of farms in the Crown's, Church's or private landlord's ownership, and all taxes and duties which arise from them. A leaf from Munkliv's cadaster and one from a cadaster from Jon's Church in Trondheim have been preserved from the 12th century.

Reins monastery's estate archive from Rissa is preserved in the Gunnerus Library. The estate was in the hands of the Horneman family for several generations. The archive contains accounts, various types of records from the estate, personal records, and much more. The picture shows a page from a cadaster dating from the beginning of the 18th century. Among others, the Gunnerus Library receives questions on civil rights, for which cadasters can be used as source material.

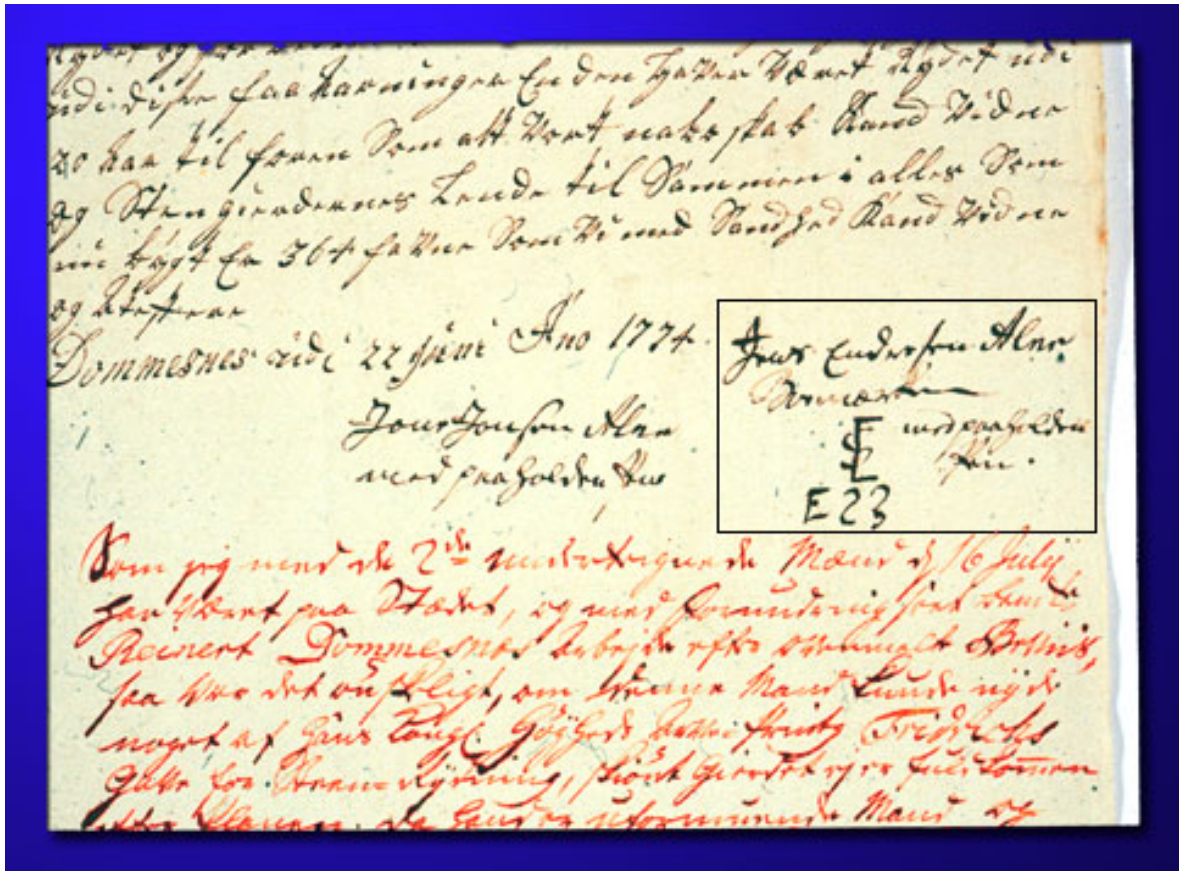
<i>Malle Jansen</i>			gotg. ordn. ful 1728 - - - - -	2/10
<i>Lundst. hove</i>		2	730 d. 18 Maartj. he C. J.	2/10
4729		2	ade f. 730	4
4730		2	731 d. 5 Oct. he C. J.	2/10
4731		2	733 d. 7 Oct. he C. J.	1/18
<i>Kon Lievt. Steck</i>		2	740 d. 1 Oct. he P. D.	1/18
733		2	Clas for 733	1/18
<i>Holdum Jundich</i>			1729 d. 25 Maartj. he C. J.	1/20
<i>Lundst. hove</i>		2	gotg. ordn. ful 1728 - - - - -	3/2
4729		2	730 d. 18 Maartj. he C. J.	2/18
4730		2	730 d. 19 Oct. he C. J.	1/20
731		2	733 d. 25 Feb. he C. J.	1/20
			734 d. 14 Maartj.	1/20
			skatte bok he C. J.	1/20
			og ungulv anpart.	1/20
<i>Dagret Andersen</i>			gotg. ordn. ful og hofn. 1728 - - - - -	1/18
<i>Lundst. hove</i>		1	1729 d. 26 Maartj. he C. J.	2/8
4729		1	730 d. 18 Maartj. he C. J.	2/8
4730		1	731 d. 28 Oct. he C. J.	2/8
4731		1	732 d. 10 Maartj.	2/8
			733 d. 25 Feb. he C. J.	2/8
			Clas for 1731	2/8
			734 d. 14 Maartj.	2/8

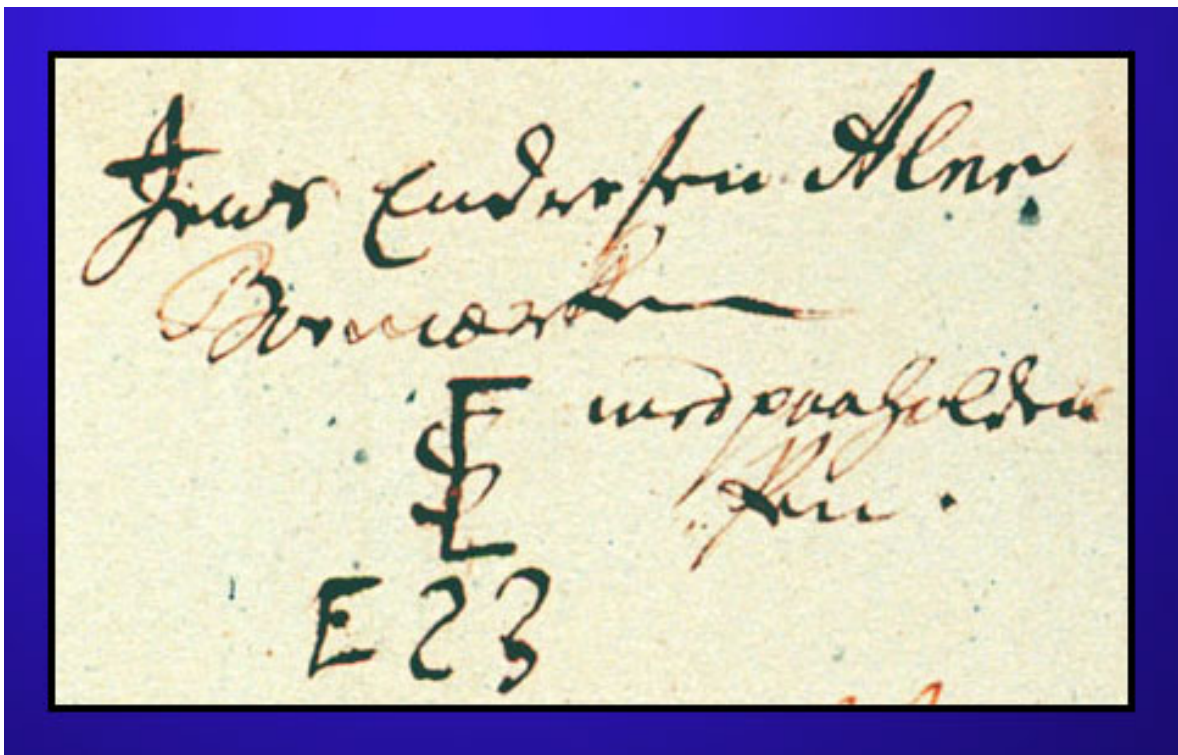
Page from a cadaster from Reins monastery estate

### Applications for awards

In 1772 the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters began to advertise prizes for improvements in agriculture, for hunting beasts of prey, and for other undertakings. In that Age of Enlightenment, we find 'potato priests' and keen

government officials as promoters. During the period that awards were advertised, 1772–1848, c. 3300 applications were received from all over Norway. Of the applications sent in, it is evident that those able to write were not especially great in number to begin with. Often priests or government officials had to write the texts themselves, and then the applicant signed the document with his initials or full name. Even then it was often with the abbreviation 'm.p.p.' added below, i.e. 'med påholden pen' (with somebody else holding the pen).

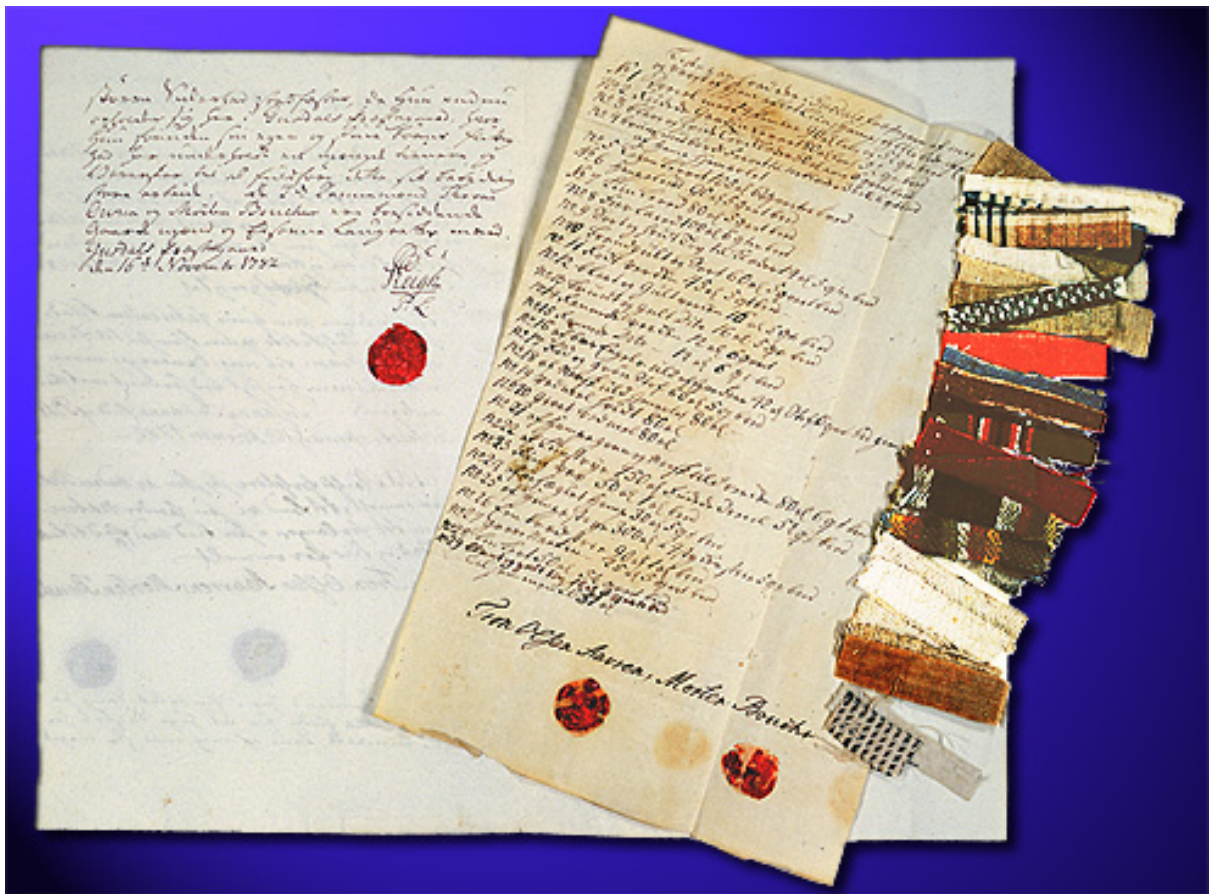




*M.p.p.-document*

### ***Applications for awards for weaving***

As early as the end of the 18th century women began to send in applications for awards for their activities on the farm estates. They rightly thought that women's work should be rewarded on the same basis as men's efforts. The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters introduced awards for women's work fairly quickly. In fact although there were a number of women who had shot wolves and cultivated fields, the majority sent in applications for weaving. In order to be eligible for an award the applicant had to include samples of their weaving, say how many alen (an old unit of measurement, 0.6275m) she had woven, and preferably how she had coloured the wool. Since these are woven pieces which have never been used for clothing or bedding, the colours are still fresh and delicate. Very often we find that it was the women themselves who had written their applications, in beautiful handwriting. The picture shows an application from Susanna Pihl, who was married to the parish priest in Gausdal. The document is dated 1783. The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters's entire archive is preserved in the Gunnerus Library.



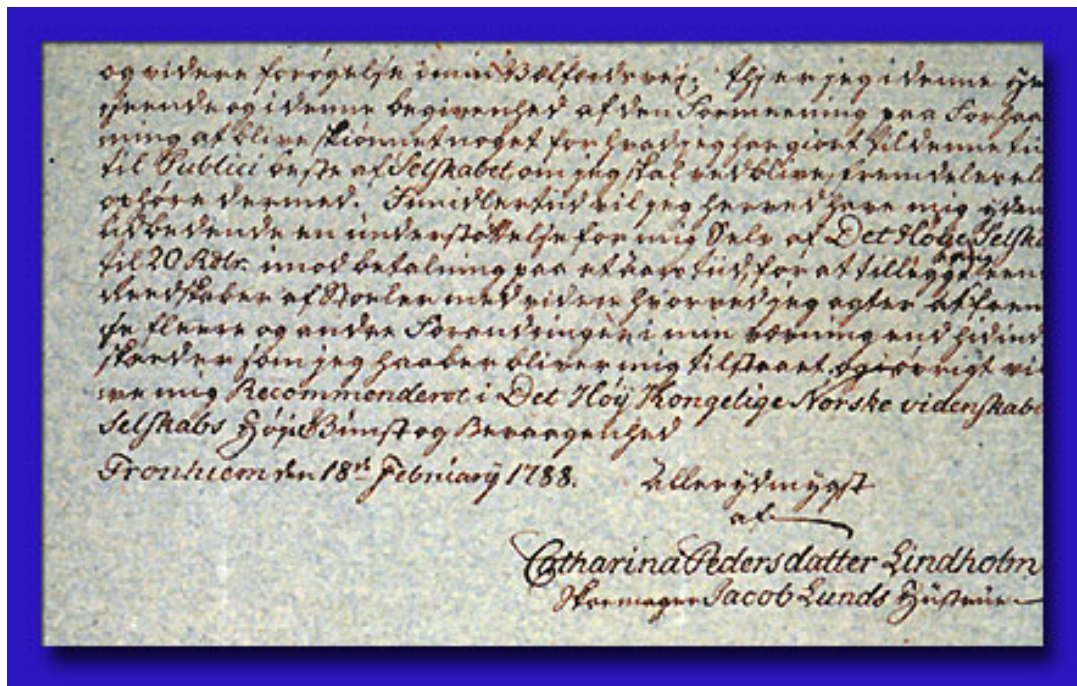
Application showing writing and fabric samples

### ***Letter from a woman***

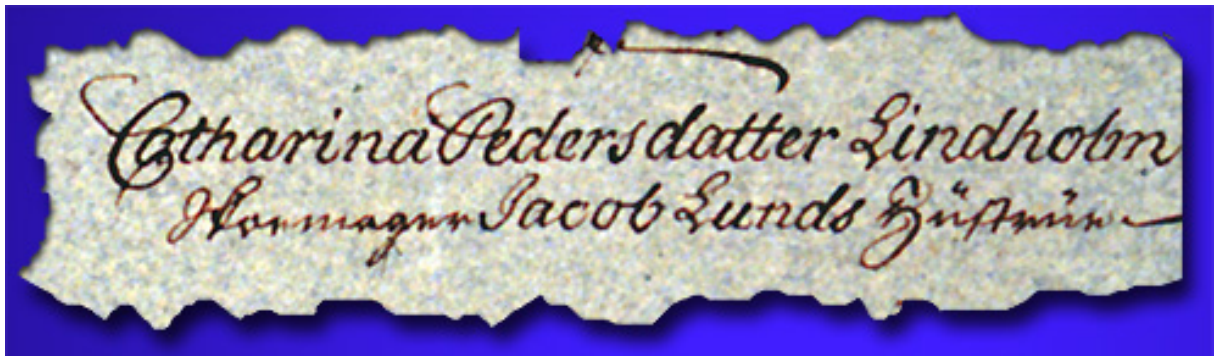
Catharina Pedersdatter Lindholm was married to a shoemaker in Trondheim. Shoemakers had comparatively high social status at the end of the 18th century. Catharina had previously been awarded a prize for weaving, but on this occasion she wanted money from the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters to start a school for weaving. She had already trained several woman in weaving. In the letter she explains her plans. Her beautiful document of 1788 demonstrates that women could write for themselves. It is not known if the application was consented to.







Catharina's letter



Catharina's beautiful signature, enlarged

The final picture shows a horse. Here the illustrator has amused himself by drawing a horse and rider without lifting the pen.



*Horse and rider, drawn in a continuous line*

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[Monica Aase](#) is a Senior Academic Librarian at the NTNU Library in Trondheim, with responsibility for the Special Collections, i.e. all non-book material, together with Libri rari (Rare Books). She has a hovedfag (cf. MPhil) in History and mellomfag (cf. Intermediate course) in French, History of Literature and Scandinavian Language and Literature. She has been pictorial editor for a number of works, including the 'Trondheim's history' which was published in connection with the city's millenium celebrations in 1997. She has several publications on 18th century history, and others related to library studies. She has been employed at the library since 1975.

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