

The first and second life of a trilingual psalter palimpsest: Latin, French and Icelandic in AM 618 4to

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The psalter Copenhagen, Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 618 4to (Kålund 1894, 2:31–32) is characterised by an unusual material, textual and linguistic composition: The original codex, written in England in the second half of the 12th century, was a luxurious parallel psalter that combined a Latin and a French version of the book of Psalms side by side. In the 16th century, the manuscript was systematically reworked by removing the French text and replacing it with an Icelandic translation of the Psalms. The result of this modification was a new parallel psalter that recombined the Psalms in a 12th century Latin version and a 16th century Icelandic translation. In its contemporary form, AM 618 4to is thus a complex palimpsest in which a French *scriptio inferior* and an Icelandic *scriptio superior* are embraced by the preserved Latin text.

This paper employs methodological approaches from material philology to analyse the complex interdependence between the textual, linguistic and material composition of the AM 618 4to by contrasting the original 12th-century Latin-French psalter with the reworked 16th-century Latin-Icelandic psalter. A closer look at the individual periods in the history of the psalter provides a more comprehensive understanding of the artefact as a whole.

The first life: A Latin-French parallel psalter

In its original form, AM 618 4to was a bilingual psalter that contained both Latin and Anglo-Norman French versions of the Psalms side by side. The Psalms (1r–116r) were followed by canticles (116v–118v), likewise in Latin and French. With the exception of a missing single folio in the middle of the psalter which has been replaced with a paper folio (fol. 71) and a few missing folios at the end of the manuscript, the codex has been completely preserved.

The manuscript is a typical example of a small group of similar bilingual psalters from late 12th century England, which illustrate medieval England as a multilingual society (Agrigoroaei 2018, 31–32; Kwakkel 2018, 319). Five of these psalters are Latin-French parallel psalters, including AM 618 4to as well as the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 768 (see Table 1). Some further psalters combine the Latin and French texts in a different *mine-en-page*, in some cases including an additional English translation as well as alternative redactions of the Latin text. In addition to its practical use, the combination of Latin and vernacular texts seems to have had both a pedagogical and ecstatic value (Agrigoroaei 2018, 31). Placing the vernacular translation next to the authoritative Latin Vulgate text presents both texts as analogous, strengthening the authority of the vernacular text (Rector 2003, 203–204).

The production of AM 618 4to involved two or three people and can roughly be divided into three steps:

1. First, both the Latin text and the French text were written by a single scribe. This scribe was proficient in both Latin and French and wrote in a Protogothic script.
2. Then, a specialist illuminator drew and painted the polychrome major initials. This illuminator had access to a larger set of pigments, including gold, and is probably not identical with the main scribe. This illuminator did not finish their work as many of the initials are not filled out (37v, 48v, 67v, etc.) and one of the initials (116va) was added by a second illuminator in step 3.
3. In the last step, the unichrome major and minor initials as well as the incipits of the Psalms were added by a second illuminator, using alternately red, green, yellow-brown and blue ink. In addition, some of the uncoloured drafts for polychrome initials were partly filled out (17ra, 27va, 27vb, 116vb) and, in the empty space in 116va, a polychrome initial of lower quality was added. This second illuminator had access to a

more restricted repertoire of pigments and less experience than the first illuminator. They may or may not be identical with the main scribe of the text.

The origin and medieval provenance of AM 618 4to is for the most part unknown. No place of origin has yet been proposed for the psalter. The main challenge to identifying its place of origin is that the psalter has not been preserved together with its original calendar. Although AM 618 4to today includes a folio of a late 13th century calendar from Wales or West England as a flyleaf, this folio did not belong to the original manuscript and does not tell us where the psalter was produced (Westergård-Nielsen 1977, 791–792). The other 12th century Latin-French parallel psalters are assumed to be connected to scriptoria in Canterbury and Winchester (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dating and suggested place of origin of the Latin-French parallel psalters.

Manuscript	Dating	Suggested place of origin
Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 618	1166–1200	England
London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero C IV	c. 1160	Winchester
Oxford, St John's College, HB4/4.a.4.21 (I.subt.1.47)	1150–1200	England
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 768 Canterbury	1175–1200	Canterbury
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAL 1670	1175–1200	Canterbury

While AM 618 4to is known to have been in Iceland from the 16th century on, it remains unknown when and how it left England and came to Iceland. There is, however, some evidence of use from the Middle Ages which has until now been overlooked: A later hand added further incipits of Psalms in the empty spaces between the original Psalms. This hand writes a Gothic Northern Textualis. A notable feature of the script is the use of the double-crossed form of the tironian note for 'et' (75v) which is particular to England (Derolez 2003, 97). This suggests that the manuscript stayed in the country for a certain period after its production.

The second life: A Latin-Icelandic parallel psalter

At an unknown point of time, AM 618 4to came to Iceland where it was systematically reworked in the 16th century. The French text in the right column was removed making the manuscript a palimpsest. This was, however, not always done completely. The original French text remains visible on several folios and two rubricated lines remain completely intact in the bottom of 37rb. In the now empty space, an Icelandic translation of the Psalms was added instead, the final part of which was finished in 1586 (116r). For the canticles in 116v–118v, no new Icelandic text was inserted. With the exception of later additions and marginal notes, the right column remains empty.

In his analysis of AM 618 4to, Christian Westergård-Nielsen (1977, 802) identifies four or five different hands, among them the Lutheran bishop of Skálholt Gísli Jónsson (ca. 1515–1589) who wrote fol. 1rb–4vb. The Icelandic text used in AM 618 4to corresponds to the translation of the book of Psalms attributed to Oddur Gottskálksson. This translation was printed in 1584 as part of *Guðbrandsbiblíá*, the first complete edition of the bible in Icelandic by Guðbrandur Þorláksson, the bishop of Hólar (Magnús Már Lárusson 1951, 154). This prompts Christian Westergård-Nielsen (1977, 804) to the assumption that Gísli Jónsson must have initiated the laborious reworking of AM 618 4to before the Icelandic text was more easily available in form of *Guðbrandsbiblíá*.



Figure 1. AM 618 4to, 77v, Den Arnarnagnæanske Samling, Copenhagen (image reproduced from Handrit.is).

How complex this reworking actually process was, can best be demonstrated by a look at the treatment of the initials of the French text. The majority of the unichrome initials was more or less carefully removed together with the main body of the text and then overwritten. The polychrome initials and some of the major unichrome initials, however, were treated in various creative ways. In some cases, they were retained and reused for the Icelandic text. For this, they had usually either to be reinterpreted or modified. The polychrome initial 'B' in 1rb, for example, was reinterpreted as a capital 'S' for *Sall*, while the polychrome initial S in 77vb was reinterpreted as capital 'D' for *Drottinn*. In 93rb, a major initial 'I' was modified by adding a round body to create the letter 'þ' for *þad*, whereas, in 93vb, the initial 'R' was adapted to 'þ' for *þackit*, by removing the final stroke of the original letter and extending its ascender. In other cases, the original French initials were retained but not reused for the Icelandic text. In 61vb, for example, a capital 'H' for *Heyr* was written into the counter of the French initial 'Q' and in 27vb a unichrome capital 'E' for *Eg* was added next to the original polychrome initial 'I'. While these initials were not incorporated into the Icelandic text, they could still be used as reading aid to

identify the beginning of a specific Psalm in the codex. Only one of the largest group of initials was completely erased and replaced with a new one: The initial 'L' in 17rb was never coloured. It could therefore be removed and substituted with a capital 'D' for *DROTENN* (Figure 1). This shows that the different scribes involved in the reworking of AM 618 4to tried different approaches to make use of the properties of the original Latin-French codex in the bilingual Latin-Icelandic psalter they aimed to create.

If it was the sole intention to own a copy of Oddur's translation of the psalter as suggested by Westergård-Nielsen (1977, 804), it would have been a lot easier to use new writing material, either parchment or paper, instead of painfully palimpsesting an older psalter and trying to incorporate the original initials in the newly added text. Reworking AM 618 4to indicates an interest in preserving and reusing both the Latin text and the beautiful book-painting of the original manuscript. While the French text would have been essentially useless for a 16th century Icelander, the Latin one would still have its uses. By replacing the obsolete French text with an Icelandic one, the overall usefulness of the manuscript would have been vastly improved.

In the margins of the manuscript, an unidentifiable number of hands added notes including names of owners, prayers, alphabets, single letters, drawings of faces and other kinds of scribbles. These marginal notes indicate frequent use of the psalter, both before and after the reworking. Furthermore, some of them suggest that the psalter was also used for educational purposes, that is for teaching how to read and write in both Icelandic and Latin (Westergård-Nielsen 1977, 803). Replacing the French text with an Icelandic one may have been primarily intended to make the psalter more useful as an educational tool in an Icelandic context.

In addition, by placing the recent Icelandic translation of the psalter in an old manuscript, the new vernacular translation could share in the authority of the ancient Latin Vulgate text written right next to it. The introduction of the Reformation in Iceland in the 16th century caused most liturgical books, written in Latin and according to Catholic doctrine, to become obsolete (Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2017, 161). However, the modification of AM 618 4to constitutes an attempt to make an obsolete codex relevant again. This seems to indicate an appreciation of old manuscripts that goes beyond their practical, textual and aesthetical value.

There can be no doubt that the modification of the manuscript is the main reason why it survives in strongly altered and damaged but largely complete form. In 1712, the manuscript was part of the collection of Thormod Torfæus (1636–1719) before it came into the possession of Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) (Kålund 1894, 32; Westergård-Nielsen 1977, 800). Today, the manuscript is part of the Arnarnagæan Collection, the largest and most important collection of Icelandic manuscripts, and kept in Copenhagen. Although there were several liturgical books among the manuscripts that he gathered, Árni was for the most part not interested in these Latin manuscripts. He would dismember them and only keep those parts that he considered important as a source for Icelandic history such as calendars and the liturgy for the feats of Icelandic saints. In contrast, he used the remaining folios of the liturgical manuscripts as binding material for his other books (Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2017, 165–169). It cannot be overstated that, unlike all other Latin psalters that Árni acquired, AM 618 4to was kept as a codex and not dismembered. The main reason why Árni considered the manuscript worth to be preserved is the Icelandic text that it contains.

An analogue modification has been attempted with another of the Latin-French parallel psalters, the codex Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 768, written in Canterbury in the fourth quarter of the 12th century (Agrigoroaei 2018, 31). The French text in the right column was systematically removed in the first half of the codex (fol. 10–58), probably to replace it with a translation in another language similar to the reworking of AM 618 4to. However, this modification attempt was later abandoned as the French text remains in the larger part of the codex, from Psalm 68 onwards, and no new text has been added in the palimpsested area. Instead, the manuscript was then reused in another way: Most of the illuminated initials have been cut out, probably to be inserted into another book (Figure 2).

While the modifications of AM 618 4to and Latin 768 happened independently from each other, they suggest similar ideas about how medieval manuscripts could be adapted to contemporary needs in modern times.

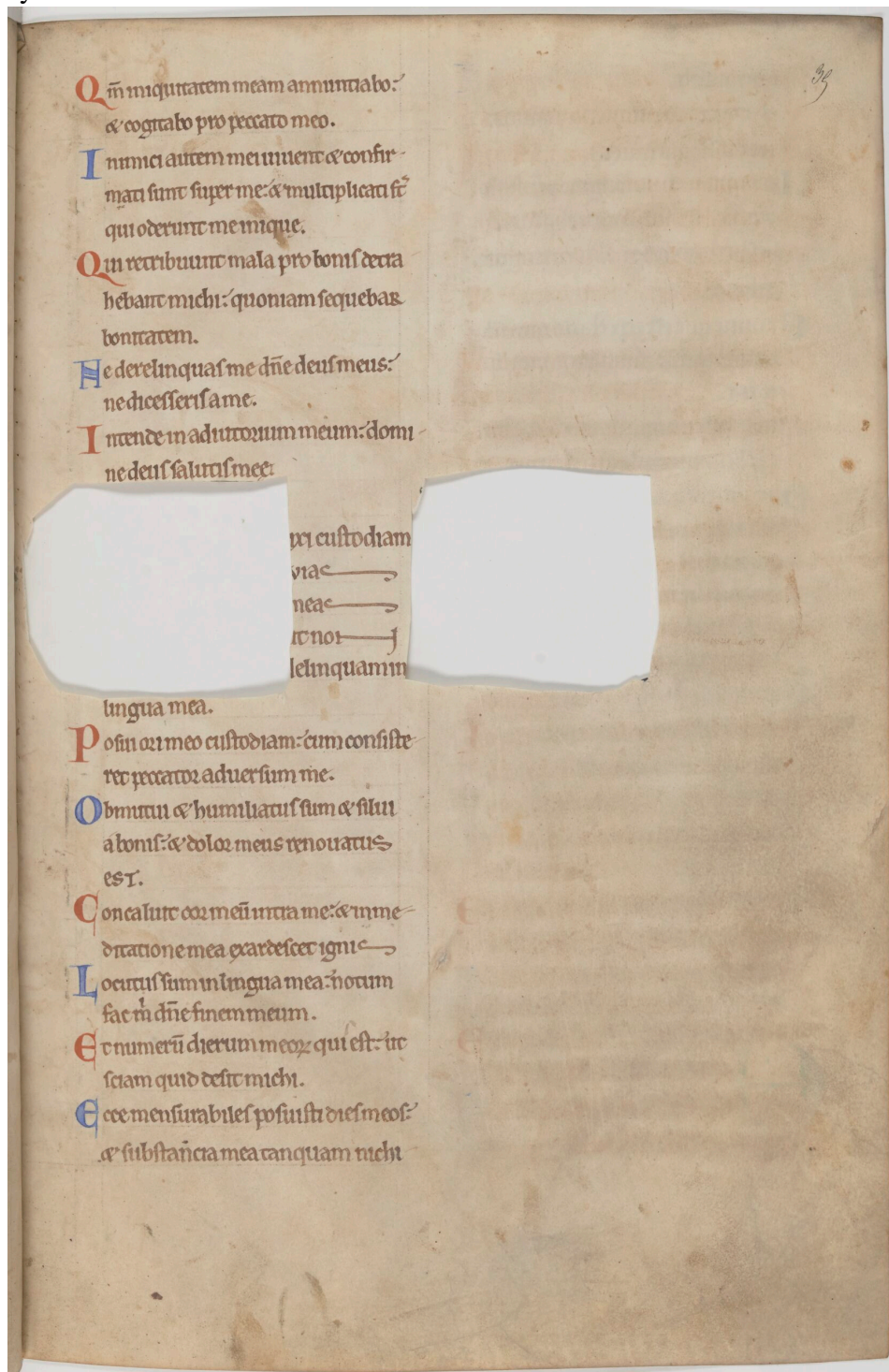


Figure 2. Latin 768, 35r (c), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (image reproduced from Manuscrits-france-angleterre.org).

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