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# Archives in Medieval England and France

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Written documentation was considered extremely valuable in the Medieval era. This notion manifested itself in the practice of keeping written works with other precious items, such as jewels. The need to consolidate and store documents arose starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and the result was the establishment of archival practices. Due to their extremely valuable nature, archives required special attention. In addition, the organization of the archives demanded that the documents be relatively easy to find. Inventories and transcription of documents were done when a major change occurred at a given religious institution, such as the arrival of a new Archbishop (a phenomenon in England and France), or construction work (seen specifically at St. Denis). The large-scale preservation and consolidation of documents began in England in the thirteenth century. At the same time, this practice developed independently in France, in a very different way. This project investigates what an archive (which was not defined as such) consisted of in these countries during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Finally, Medieval archives must always be considered in a critical manner, as they are at times incomplete, and have been altered by contemporary archivists.



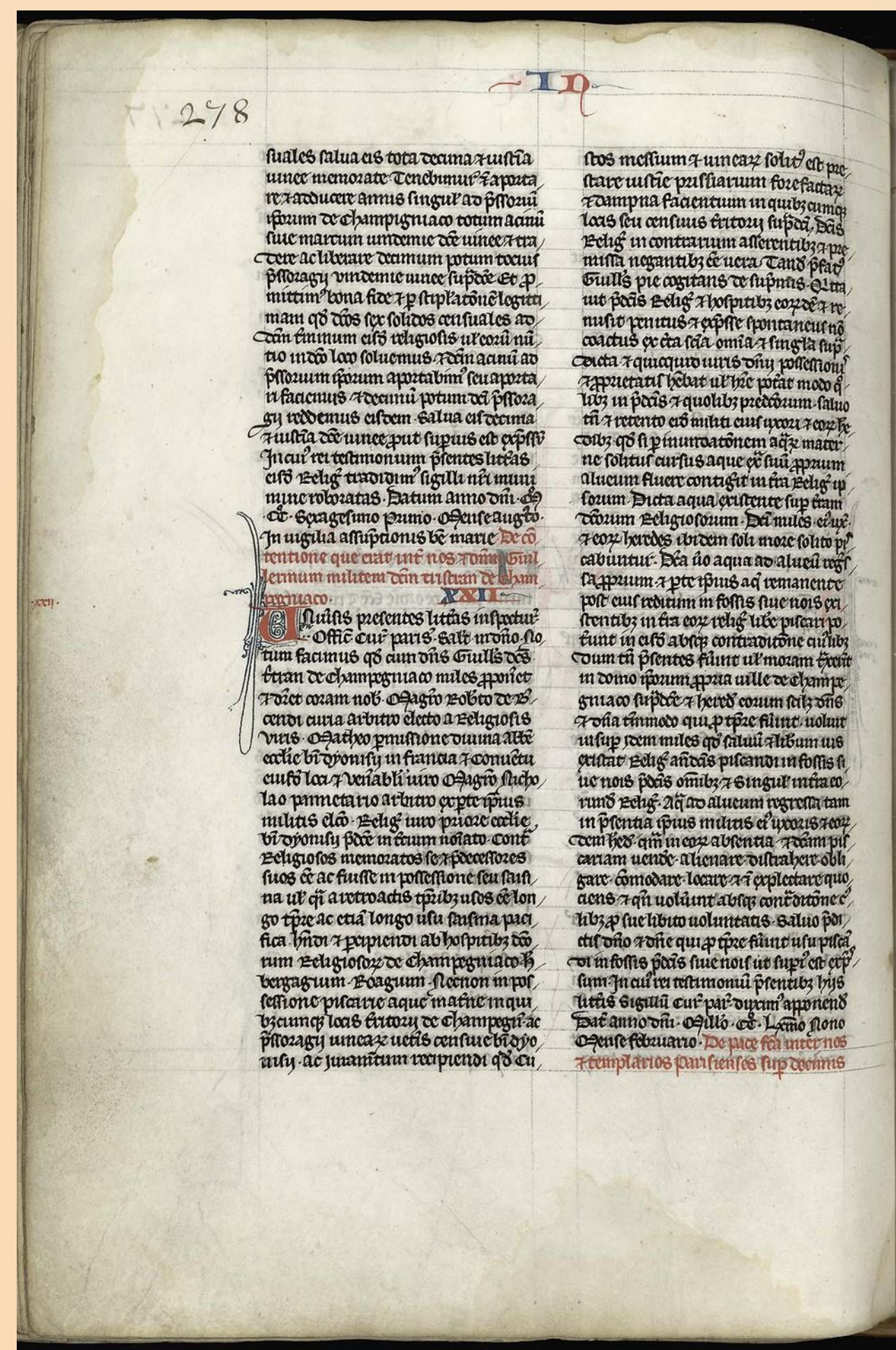
An example of a 14<sup>th</sup> century vas, which were commonly used for the storage of English archives, Oxford, Merton College

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this project consisted of determining what a medieval archive was. This involved particular consideration of the context and environment in which the documents themselves were created, and when and how they were compiled. There was also an element of comparative analysis included. The archives and archival systems of the English and the French were studied in order to understand the similarities and differences between the two, as they both developed independently in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Essentially, this project attempted to understand the nature of the archive and thus extrapolate conclusions on the importance and role of written documentation in the Medieval period. The findings revealed how the people of Medieval Europe viewed and valued written documentation. It also demonstrated the progression and development of archives from their inception, which is imperative to understanding the evolution of document preservation and archiving on a whole. Comprehending the reason for the existence of a document is a necessary first step to undertake any type of historical research.



"The Article of Barons," 1215, British Library, MS 4838



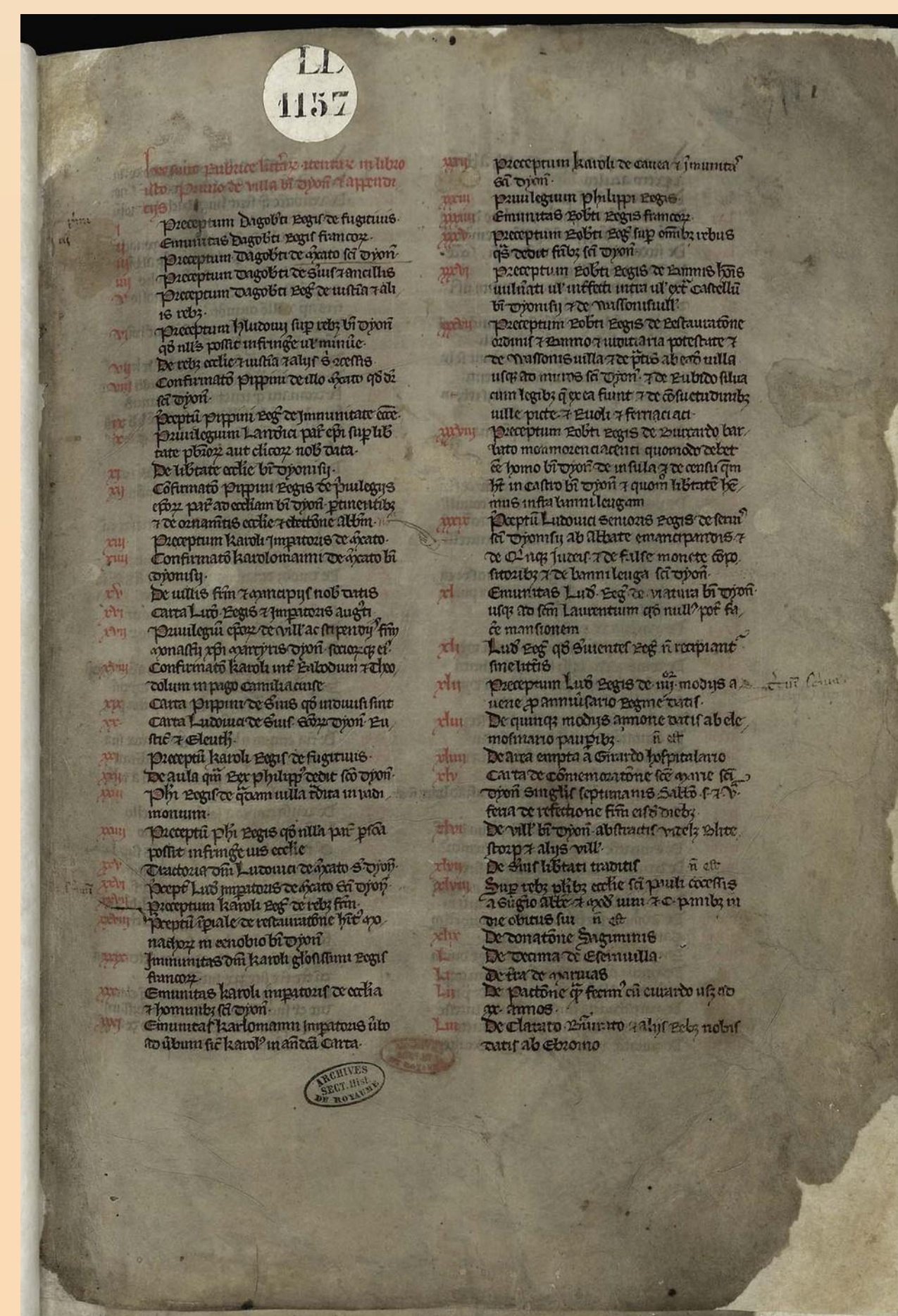
Cartulaire blanc, tome 1, Archives nationales, LL1157: fol. 278

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This research project relies exclusively on secondary sources. A variety of published works, in English and in French, were studied, in search of references to Medieval documents. The French case consists of the archives located at Abbey of St. Denis, which gathered royal documents. English archival practices were studied in a general sense, however still pertaining to royal documentation. In addition to this, several articles and encyclopedia entries contributed to form the contextual foundation within which the data collected could be situated. All the examples found were then placed in an Excel database comprising categories such as: type of documents preserved, date, location where they were kept, system used to find information within a given collection, and method by which they were conserved. Once the database was finalised, some patterns and relationships manifested themselves.

## 4. RESULTS

The findings of the project were at times inconsistent, however nonetheless revealing. Unfortunately, some of the secondary sources consulted did not provided the information necessary to fill all the categories in the database. In both the English and the French case, cartularies appear to be synonymous with archives. The large-scale preservation of documents consistently involved the transcription of charters into a cartulary. This is fitting as the type of document that was most commonly preserved was the charter. In addition, the archives (when not in transit, which was common) were always stored at a religious institution, typically an abbey or a church. Both kingdoms demonstrated a propensity towards organizing documents geographically and chronologically. There were a few differences that became visible between the French and the English archives. The Abbey of St. Denis created numerous copies of the *Cartulaire blanc*, however each copy was transcribed with errors corrected and with more clarity in mind. Each successive copy was assigned a different colour and was referred to as old or new. In contrast, the English stored their documents mostly in chests (at times on shelves) and utilized running numbers and granges, with reference numbers on the dorse of certain documents. There was the similar practice in both countries of creating indexes that were kept within a cartulary, and which assisted in the navigation of the volume, and at times this index made references to copies stored elsewhere and where to find them.



Cartulaire blanc, tome 1, Archives nationales, LL1157: tables des actes, fol. 1

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The Medieval archives were dynamic and alive in that they were constantly moving, changing, and developing. It is impossible to ignore the role that archivists had in creating the collections that are studied today. The archives of England and St. Denis serve as prime examples of the construction of history. The documents preserved in various cartularies were chosen for a specific reason, by an individual with personal biases and agendas. Archives were not simply a collection of documents that were piled together and stored away, never to be consulted or altered. They were itinerant, and were constantly developing alongside the needs and wants of the people who created them. Though the comparative analysis aspect of this project initially seemed that it would reveal two distinct and separate archival systems, the reality is much more nuanced. But, in England and at St. Denis, the process of archiving became the means by which information was preserved and history was created.

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**Images:**

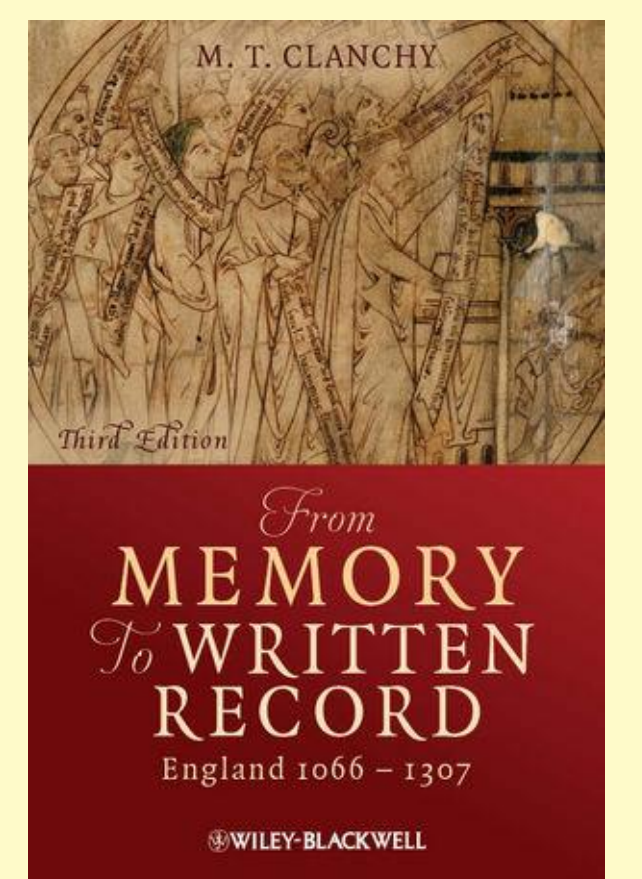
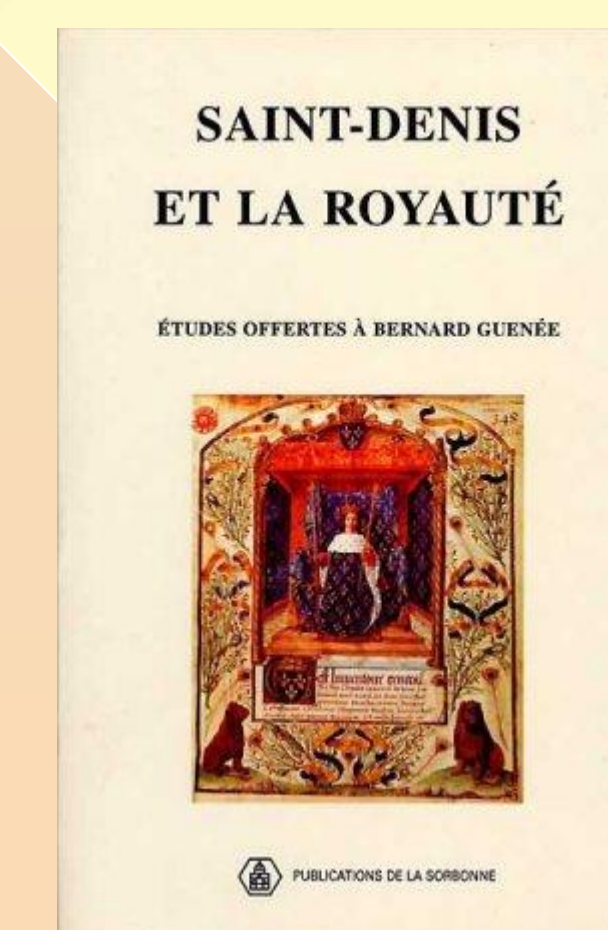
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## 8. CONTACT INFORMATION

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