

Case Study 2.1: A Medieval Cartulary: The Codex Eberhardi

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From the moment of its foundation, a medieval monastery accumulated charters, which were written proof of the donations and privileges that the institution received from its many benefactors. These charters could easily – and quickly – number in the thousands, which tended to strain the rather basic medieval archival capabilities. One obvious way to facilitate access to the numerous charters, and a way on which hundreds of institutions converged, was to produce a well-ordered master copy of a significant portion of the charters, so as to have them all at hand at one time. Apart from the aspect of retrievability, concerns of conservation also played a role in producing such master copies. The latter were called cartularies. They could be structured along many guiding principles; the copied charters could be arranged, for example, in regional or chronological order or according to importance. Cartularies most often contained only copies of the charters' texts, but, in some cases, they also contained more elaborate copies, which imitated the different scripts, signatures and monograms of the charters.

This is the case with the famous Codex Eberhardi. It was produced in the 1150s by the monk Eberhard at the monastery of Fulda, at this date already an ancient institution, founded in the eighth century and one of the most important monasteries of the Early Middle Ages. By Eberhard's time, however, the glory days were long gone and the possessions in disarray. Eberhard was given the task of collecting and copying old charters, which he did in two sizable volumes, drawing on originals as well as older cartularies. He rarely copied a charter verbatim, often fiddling with the style. There are even quite a few outright fabrications in his cartulary, mostly in the section of most important charters. The Codex Eberhardi is especially notable for its reproduction (or imagination) of the graphic elements of the charters, most notably the monograms (stylised signatures) and last lines (*Sig-numszeile*) in different script and ink, as if an impression of authenticity was aspired to. The sumptuous initials (first letters) in the form of popes, emperors and kings, as well as other illuminations, are one of a kind. The Codex Eberhardi is easily one of the most prestigious cartularies ever produced in the Middle Ages.

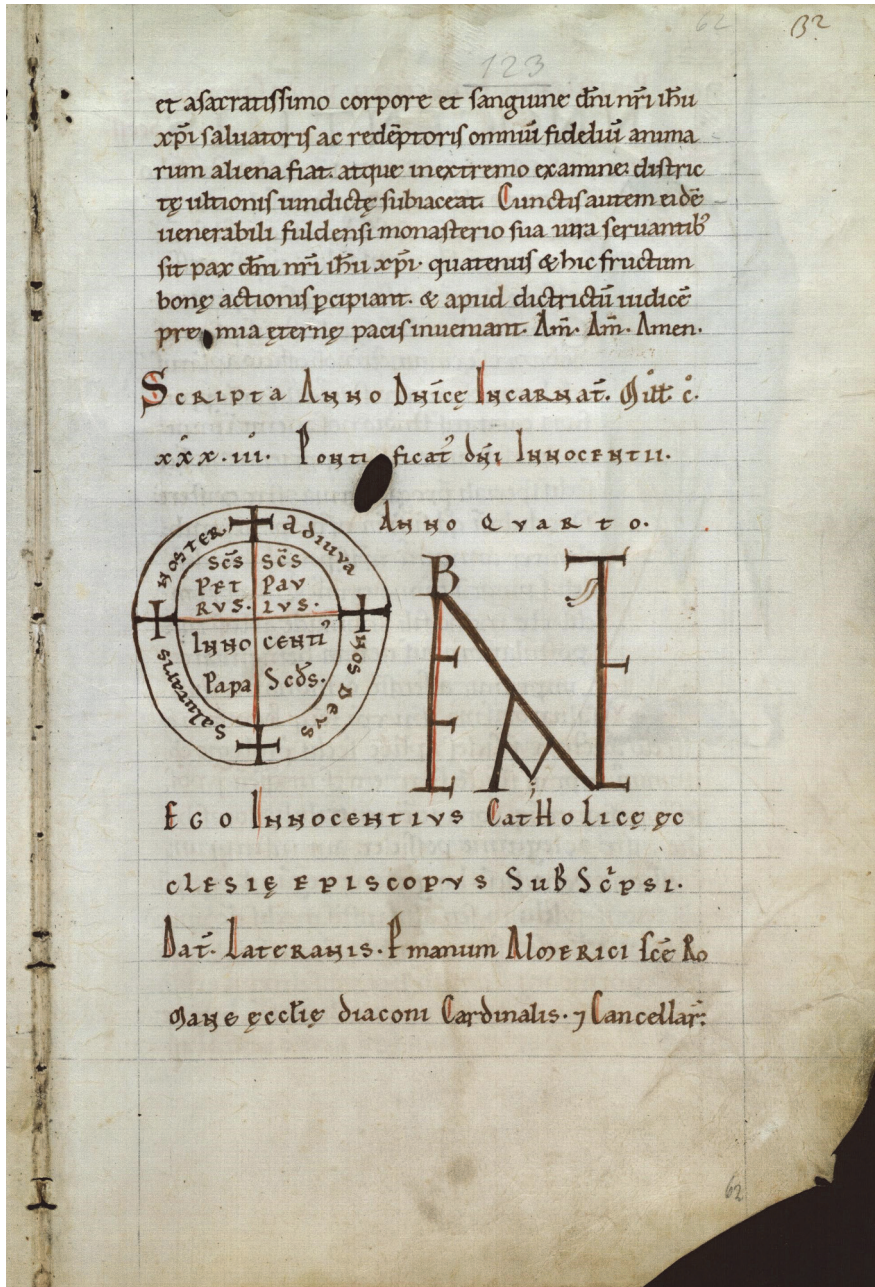


Fig. 1: Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg (HStAM), Best. K, Nr. 425, Bd. 1, fol. 62r / p. 123; © Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg.