The First Manuals of English History: Two Late Thirteenth-Century Genealogical Rolls of the Kings of England in the Royal Collection

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When in 1872 Joseph Mayer, the great Liverpool collector, showed to his friend Thomas Wright, probably the greatest nineteenth-century English antiquarian, the late thirteenth-century genealogical roll of the kings of England written in Anglo-Norman he had just acquired, Wright made some searches in the British Museum Library collections to see if he could find some similar manuscripts. Curiously enough, he found only two other closely related rolls (MSS. Lansdowne rolls 3 and Add. 21368), but none of the illustrated ones which were already among the various collections: MS. Cotton Roll XV. 7 and the two beautiful rolls of the Royal collection that are the subject of the present article: Royal MS. 14 B. V and Royal MS. 14 B. VI, which were so well displayed in the ‘Royal Manuscripts’ exhibition (fig. 1). Fortunately though, these rolls in the British Library have been preserved, whereas Joseph Mayer’s roll has disappeared since its

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Author’s note. I would like to thank the organizers of the Royal Manuscripts conference for inviting me and to express my deep gratitude to my friend Dr Marigold Anne Norbye for her careful rereading of this paper and her very useful corrections and comments.

1 Thomas Wright (ed.), Feudal Manuals of English History. A Series of Popular Sketches of our National History, Compiled at Different Periods, from the Thirteenth Century to the Fifteenth, for the Use of the Feudal Gentry and Nobility, now first Edited from the Original Manuscripts (London, 1872).

2 In his search for similar genealogical rolls, Wright failed to identify some other BL manuscripts: MSS. Add. 8101, Add. 11713, Cotton Roll XIII. 17, Harl. Roll C. 7, and Harl. Roll C. 10. Very soon after Wright’s search, in the years 1873-1876, four more similar rolls were acquired by the British Library: MSS. Add. 29502, Add. 29503, Add. 29504, and Add. 30079.

Fig. 1a, b. Parallel views of the first membrane of Royal MS. 14 B. V and Royal MS. 14 B. VI, with the circular diagram of the Heptarchy, the commentary, and the very beginning of the genealogical diagram.
publication by Wright and did not form part of Mayer’s bequest to Liverpool University Library. 4

Although he saw so few of them, and certainly not the finest of them, Thomas Wright had the brilliant intuition that these genealogical rolls were much more than curiosities likely to hold the attention of the antiquarian alone, unlike E. W. Godwin, who, a few years later, presented another such roll to the Society of Antiquaries in London as ‘a very curious genealogical roll’: 5 this was the Chaworth Roll, recently thoroughly studied by Alixe Bovey when exhibited at Sam Fogg’s. 6 Wright called them ‘feudal manuals of English history’, and very rightly so.

Even though his pioneering publication should have spurred historians to search out such rolls in order to refine our knowledge of them and to assess their circulation in medieval England, they went largely unnoticed for another century. The only one of them—which is in fact very atypical—that was considered worthy of appearing in several art exhibitions was Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley Rolls 3, most recently in the great London exhibition of 1987, ‘Age of Chivalry’. 7

For the recent reappraisal of these genealogical rolls, as witnessed by the choice of MS. Royal 14 B. VI as one of the highlights of the Royal Manuscripts exhibition, we must pay tribute, obviously, to the British Library and exhibition curators. But we should not forget some specialists in Anglo-Norman literature or medieval illumination who were among the first to show them the attention they deserve, in first place Diana Tyson, who included them in her many articles on the Anglo-Norman Prose Brut, 8 and William Monroe, who devoted to them a large part of his 1990 Courtauld Institute Ph.D. thesis. 9

4 This roll does not appear either in the various catalogues of Liverpool University Library, to which Joseph Mayer bequeathed most of his manuscripts, or in the auction catalogues of parts of his collections between 1875 and 1887. Owing to a confusion, it was recently identified by Dominique Stutzmann and Piotr Tylus, Les Manuscrits médiévaux français et occitans de la Preussische Staatsbibliothek et de la Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Wiesbaden, 2007), p. 64, as Mayer MS. 12012 in Liverpool University Library. In fact, this is another very different, fifteenth-century, roll, containing the Latin chronicle attributed to Thomas Sprott, which was also edited when Joseph Mayer was alive: Thomas Sprott’s Chronicle of Profane and Sacred History, Translated from the Original, on Twelve Parchment Skins (Seven of them Double) in the Possession of Joseph Mayer [. . .] Accompanied by an Exact Anastatic Fac Simile of the Entire Original Codex, ed. William Bell (Liverpool, 1851). This later roll was regularly catalogued and even, on one occasion at least, exhibited; see Neil Ripley Ker, Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries (Oxford, 1969–92), vol. iii, pp. 224–5, and Medieval Manuscripts on Merseyside. Catalogue of an Exhibition Held in the University Art Gallery, Liverpool, from 6 May to 16 July 1993, and in the Courtauld Institute Galleries, London, from 15 October to 28 November 1993 (Liverpool, 1993), pp. 32–3. The absence of Mayer’s thirteenth-century genealogical roll of the kings of England from the Liverpool University Library collections was confirmed to me in the 1990s by Claire Johnson, then Curator for Special Collections in the library.


Since these two finely illuminated rolls, as far as I know, have never been exhibited until now, I would like to focus in this paper on the multiple visual means used in these very original historical epitomes to improve the reader’s understanding and memorizing of English history, not only by clarifying the filiation and succession of kings from Egbert to Edward I—which is blindingly obvious—but also by emphasizing some features of this history that were then considered as essential.

Two luxury historical abstracts

First of all, it is important to recall that these two splendid Royal rolls are part of a quite large family of at least forty—one rolls made in England between the 1260s and the 1420s, which were mainly fashionable during the reigns of Edward I (1272-1307) and Edward II (1307-1327), apart from a brief and limited revival during the reign of Richard II (1377-1399) (fig. 2). These rolls can differ greatly one from the other, either in language, layout, quality of execution or range of illustrations. Although most of them have a similar text, originally written in Latin (the best, and possibly the earliest, example being Add. MS. 30079, which could have originally been written between 1265 and 1272), but soon to be translated into Anglo—Norman, and begin with a circular diagram of the Anglo—Saxon Heptarchy which acts as a sort of frontispiece, the only common features of the whole family are the use of a genealogical diagram and, indeed, the original support, the vellum roll.

The two Royal rolls belong to the smaller group of seventeen illustrated manuscripts. And, if we leave aside the three very different Latin rolls and two atypical Anglo—Norman rolls, there remains a group of twelve rolls which, in spite of inevitable variations, have much in common: an Anglo—Norman text, a genealogical diagram beginning with king Egbert—never Alfred or Brutus, as can be seen in other rolls—and above all fully illustrated medallions: large medallions with full—length figures of kings, generally seated on benches or thrones, and smaller medallions with busts of their descendants. Of all these, only four make use of gold leaf, which undoubtedly characterizes them as luxury manuscripts, probably intended for aristocratic patrons: the Royal rolls are two of these (the other two being Bodleian Library, MS. Broxbourne 112.3, and Cambridge University Library, MS. Dd. III. 58).


11 The end of the last paragraph, an account of the reign of Henry III, which mentions his death in 1272, could have been added later, since there seems to be a change in writing (or at least a ‘reprise d’encre’ or a ‘reprise de plume’). But the text in the various medallions of the genealogical diagrams, which was written in the original hand, mentions the death of Henry, Simon de Montfort’s eldest son; and this Henry died at the battle of Evesham in 1265.

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Fig. 2. Add. MS. 30679, Latin genealogy of the kings of England, dating 1265-1272.
Moreover, both Royal rolls have been very carefully written and laid out and show a greater variety of illuminations which points to the same conclusion. Each paragraph of the commentary begins with a pen-flourished initial: gold with blue filigree in Royal MS. 14 B. V, alternating blue with red filigree, red with blue filigree or gold with either blue or red filigree in Royal MS. 14 B. VI. On the first membrane of Royal MS. 14 B. V, even two paragraph marks are decorated in the same way. And the first three paragraphs of Royal MS. 14 B. VI (with the commentary on the diagram of the Heptarchy and the accounts of the reigns of Egbert and Brihtric) begin with more unusual champ initials (fig. 3). Finally, we cannot but be impressed by the profusion and imagination of ‘marginal’ drawings in Royal MS. 14 B. V, which in fact, far from being confined to the margins, invade almost all the available space between the medallions and the various paragraphs of the commentary all along the roll, starting with the interstices in the diagram of the Heptarchy. The dominant themes of these ‘droleries’ are animals (sometimes illustrations of fables), hunting scenes or musicians (fig. 4). We can even find the ambiguous representation

![Fig. 3. Royal MS. 14 B. VI, first membrane.](image1)

![Fig. 4. Detail of Royal MS. 14 B. V, at the bottom of membrane 4, showing a ‘marginal drawing’: a hare mounted on a hound hunting a deer, flanking the medallion of William, son of Rollo and second duke of Normandy.](image2)
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of the knight fighting a snail over which much ink has been spilled and which has been most recently discussed by Michael Camille (fig. 5). These drawings must have constituted a sort of familiar as well as fanciful counterpoint to the ‘sacred’ main theme of the royal succession. Moreover, these marginal drawings are very characteristic of what is generally called the ‘Court Style’. And William Monroe, who made the most thorough codicological study of these rolls, has shown that, while the artist of Royal MS. 14 B. V surely painted the historiated initials in a Bible (Dublin, Trinity College, MS. A. 1. 4), Royal MS. 14 B. VI, for its part, was related to other manuscripts produced in the ‘Court Style’, especially to a series of pictures of the Passion with French texts which are in a book with a calendar for St Augustine’s Canterbury (Cambridge, St John’s College, MS. 262, ff. 50-56v), probably executed in the same workshop.

So we can say with some confidence that the British Library houses two of the finest rolls of this kind. And, judging by the fact that they both originally ended with the medallion of Edward I as king, without showing any of his children (unlike many other Anglo-Norman rolls), we can assume that they were among the earliest made (even if this does not help to date them precisely, since Edward I had already had five children before he became king of England in 1272).

Nevertheless, the different visual characteristics of these rolls were not intended to be purely decorative. Many of them are much more meaningful, starting with the chosen material support.

The significant choice of the roll format

Beginning with the most obvious feature of these manuscripts, there is something to be said about the choice of the roll format. It could indeed have been seen, as it seems to us, as ‘ideally suited to the presentation of history as genealogy or a royal family tree’, to quote a few words of the description of Royal MS. 14 B. VI in the exhibition press releases. Furthermore, this format had already sometimes (but not exclusively) been used from the first decades of the thirteenth century for the presentation of Biblical history in the quite largely diffused Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi, written at the end of the twelfth century by a Parisian theology teacher, Peter of Poitiers. And there is no doubt that, even if no genealogical roll written by Matthew Paris has come down to us, the great St Albans chronicler was influenced by this Biblical model when he devised in the mid-thirteenth century his own brief Latin genealogical histories of the kings of England, which were in turn the ultimate model for the later genealogical rolls. Nevertheless, as far as I know, the roll format had never been used

before the end of the thirteenth century for presenting the genealogy of the kings of England or, for that matter, any other royal genealogy. Conversely, I only know of one (later) codex (Royal MS. 13. A. XVIII) containing this very same genealogical diagram beginning with Egbert.

So this almost systematic choice of the roll format for the late thirteenth-century and subsequent genealogical rolls of the kings of England could have another explanation which could account for this English singularity. I do not think it was an innocent or meaningless option. At a time when so many English records, from the Chancery rolls to most manor court rolls, were written down on rolls, this format could convey an impression of authority, if not of indubitable official nature. Whatever was kept on rolls must have been regarded by a good many people in late thirteenth-century England as coming from circles partaking, at some level, in the exercise of power. To quote Don Skemer speaking of other contemporary rolls (very similar in width to the genealogical rolls), ‘the use of a roll format, closely associated with royal record keeping for more than a century, could have imbued private statute rolls with an aura of quasi-public authority’.17 This, I think, is equally true for the genealogical rolls: their very format was part of an overall process aiming at giving them the appearance, if not of an official history, at least of what we could call an ‘authorized version’ of English history.

In the case of royal genealogies, the roll format could also have been chosen for other reasons. It could be seen, obviously, as a symbol of continuity, and maybe of antiquity, if we assume, which is far from certain, that medieval people considered the roll to be an older format than the codex. Something written on a roll might therefore increase the prestige of the English monarchy by giving the impression that it originated in a distant and remote past. It is likely that a roll could also be seen as a symbol of perpetuity, since, unlike a book, a roll can be indefinitely extended, if needed, to carry on the history it has begun to tell. Indeed, many of these genealogical rolls were continued, as Royal MS. 14 B. VI shows, even if, in this case, it was a quite short continuation, which did not even require the addition of a new sheet of parchment.18 At the very least, a roll does not fix any temporal limit to the history it retraces. In a way, the history of English kings could seem to the reader a history in the making, even a never-ending story, to which it was always possible to add a new chapter.

The genealogical diagram: evident and veiled message

The second level of analysis of the very rich graphic apparatus of these rolls is obviously the place of the diagrams, and particularly the genealogical diagram. It is important to stress that, unlike some other medieval genealogies, almost all the rolls, including the two Royal rolls, give the diagram a central and dominant place. Indeed, the ‘drawing’ is not a simple illustration – even an explanatory illustration – of the text any more, but quite the opposite: the text is a commentary on the diagram, it is placed in an unusually subordinate position in relation to it. This is made most clear when looking at the respective location of diagram and text. Apart from the two first paragraphs, commenting on the diagram of the Heptarchy, the text is not written in long lines, but broken up into brief paragraphs, sometimes divided into two parts written on either side of a king’s medallion, if needed, depending on the lack of space or the length of the corresponding account of the king’s reign. These paragraphs fill the room left free by the diagram, which was drawn first, and they adjust themselves to its contours (MSS. Royal 14 B.

18 Another contemporary illustrated roll, Cambridge University Library MS. Dd. III. 58, was augmented by a much longer Anglo-Norman continuation some time after 1432, maybe in the entourage of John, duke of Bedford.
V and Royal 14 B. VI, membrane 6) (fig. 6). The text itself very often refers to the diagrams, starting with the very first words of the two paragraphs of the commentary on the diagram of the Heptarchy: ‘Par ceste figure de sus …’ (By the figure above …), ‘Pus ke les regnes ke sunt escriz de sus en la figure …’ (When the kingdoms [whose names are] written above in the figure); or to take another example, to which I will return soon, at the end of the paragraph devoted to saint Margaret (mother of Edith/Mathilda, wife of king Henry I), which states: ‘E ceste ligne dure au cercle ou Maud, la fille au rei de Escoce e a seinte Margarete, est escrite’ (And this line continues as far as the circle where Maud[’s name], the daughter of the king of Scotland and saint Margaret, is written). The very arrangement of the text depends on the genealogical figure.

Fig. 6. Royal MS.14 B. V, last membrane.
The diagrams (both the Heptarchy diagram and the genealogical diagram) themselves are very clearly delineated: circles have been traced with a compass, connecting lines with a ruler or sometimes, as in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, with compasses, giving an impression of symmetry and harmony, for instance in the way the children of Edward the Elder are shown, who are further united by an horizontal decorative band (fig. 7). The general visual effect of these rolls is one of great clarity and the main purpose of this graphic device was, no doubt, didactic, as it was in genealogies worked out by Peter of Poitiers in order to make Biblical history easier to understand and to memorize for the Parisian students in theology. But England was the first country where this original graphic device was transposed to secular, national, history, thanks to Matthew Paris, who was aware of the power of images and was a very ingenious user and inventor of all sorts of graphic devices or pictorial codes in his autograph manuscripts.

Nevertheless, beyound this search for clarity, the priority accorded here to picture over text could not but give the impression that the royal lineage was the backbone of English history, its frame made visible to the reader: the English royal dynasty acts as the guiding principle of national history and is thus conferred a role in structuring its unfolding. This impression is strengthened by the initial addition of the diagram of the Heptarchy, which obviously symbolizes the unification of all England (the central medallion in the

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diagram) under the authority of a single dynasty (fig. 8). Although this very impressive

*Fig. 8. Royal MS.14 B.VI, detail of the first membrane, showing the diagram of the Heptarchy.*

‘opening scene’ is not connected to the genealogical diagram itself by any line (and is even separated from it by two long explanatory paragraphs), the subliminal message here seems quite clear: the royal dynasty is deeply rooted in the very English land itself, a land very abundant in game, judging by the profusion of animals and hunting scenes in the diagram of MS. Royal 14 B. V (fig. 9). This ‘autochthonous’ dynasty (in the etymological sense of that word) thus stands consequently as the guarantor of the kingdom’s unity and perpetuity.

*Fig. 9. Royal MS.14 B.V, detail of first membrane showing the diagram of the Heptarchy with hunting scenes.*
At first sight, then, English history was first and foremost the history of a royal dynasty, judging by the genealogical diagram, which emphasizes as much as it can the hereditary transmission of the crown. One of the most obvious purposes of this earliest family of genealogical rolls was to assert and to demonstrate visually that, in spite of the upheaval provoked by the Norman conquest, the reigning king (as well as every king since Henry II) had proper royal English blood flowing in his veins. In a way, these rolls can be seen as a distant visual illustration of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Genealogia Regum Anglorum*, written by the Cistercian abbot for the young Henry Plantagenet in 1153–1154, just a few months before he became king of England, to celebrate his prestigious English royal ancestry, through his mother Mathilda (Mathilde l’Emperesse). In the rolls, this demonstration uses two different, yet complementary, methods. First, there is a very long vertical line running down along the left-hand side on several membranes of the roll (even crossing all the other lines of the diagram in Royal MS. 14 B. V) connecting the medallion of Saint Margaret, granddaughter of the Anglo-Saxon king Edmund II Ironside, to the medallion of her daughter Edith/Mathilda, wife of Henry I and grandmother of Henry II (fig. 10). Second, the crucial marriage of Edith/Mathilda to Henry I is illustrated in another vertical line.
Mathilda is frequently given a visual emphasis, as in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, by an unusual graphic device with connecting lines between wife and husband, and between each of them and each of their two children (William, who drowned in the shipwreck of the ‘White Ship’ in 1120, and Mathilda [here wrongly replaced by Henry II], who married Geoffrey Plantagenet in 1128) (fig. 11). It is important to note that Edith/Mathilda is thus the only queen in the entire genealogy to be represented side by side with her husband (and even on an equal footing with him in MS. Royal 14 B. VI). In the eyes of Aelred of Rievaulx and, later on, of Matthew Paris, this marriage was the fulfillment of the ‘Green Tree’ prophecy made by King Edward the Confessor on his deathbed: at last, the English throne was held anew by a true English king.

Obviously, this assertion was not entirely satisfactory for the English kings; far from it, since it implied that the first Norman kings, including William the Conqueror, had been usurpers. This is certainly the reason why all Anglo-Norman illustrated rolls (unlike their Latin model) show with great detail William’s Norman ancestry from duke Rollo, interrupting for a while the proper English genealogy (after the medallion of the usurper Harold, who wrongly held the crown, according to the text). There is no need to insist on the pride in this Norman
ancestry, so manifest in MS. Royal 14 B. VI (fig. 12), and all the more understandable if we remember that most readers of these rolls would have had a (partly) Norman ancestry as well.  

This is the occasion to say a word about the superb and amusing vegetal decoration painted alongside the Norman genealogy. Neither of these two rolls shows, strictly speaking, a ‘genealogical tree’, going upward from roots to branches (like the Tree of Jesse). Yet, unlike all other rolls, both Royal rolls resort to this decorative theme, each in its own way (fig. 13). In Royal MS. 14 B. V , trees are frequently drawn inside the medallions, as a sort of natural outgrowth of the benches on which the kings are seated (with no apparent reason for their presence or number). In Royal MS. 14 B. VI, huge trees (clearly an oak tree, symbol of strength, majesty and longevity, on the right in the first instance) flanked two essential parts of the genealogy, first when the lineage of the dukes of Normandy is shown, as if suggesting the regeneration of the English dynasty by fresh Norman blood; and then at the very end of the original genealogy, where the medallion of Edward I is flanked by a tree and what I think is a red hawthorn or may tree, symbol of spring and renewal (later a Tudor emblem for a very different reason). In either roll, the tree is probably a metaphor of fertility and fruitfulness.

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24 This could be confirmed in Royal MS. 14 B. VI by the presence of a squirrel and of two rabbits, sexual symbols according to Michael Camille, op. cit., p. 118. The presence of a monkey staring at a magpie in the oak tree is much more puzzling…
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If we look more closely at the genealogical diagrams, we realize that they only have the appearance of genealogies. If we define a genealogy as a scheme showing, by the way of connecting lines, the blood relations between individuals, there are in fact many anomalies. This is not to say that they are pseudo-genealogies or that their makers intended to falsify the real family links in order to increase the prestige of the English rulers by inventing them a glorious ancestry (as is very often the case in medieval genealogies). By and large, the genealogical information given in these rolls is accurate, if we except the curious mistake presenting William the Conqueror as the son of a Mathilda, daughter of duke Richard I (and then as a first cousin of Edward the Confessor, represented in the same row of small medallions, and also of his real father, duke Robert).  

This mistake was partly corrected later in both rolls; in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, the connecting line between Mathilda and William has been erased.
some cases, though, memory has faded over the years: for instance, the names of the last two daughters of William the Conqueror had fallen into oblivion, which leads to some curious wording in their medallion: ‘La quarte morut’, ‘La quinte morut’ (The fourth [daughter] died, The fifth [daughter] died). And the information in the commentary has been borrowed from the more reliable English chroniclers, such as William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Ralph of Diceto, Roger of Wendover or Matthew Paris. But it is important to remember that most genealogies are reconstructions, resulting from conscious or unconscious choices. For instance, it is clear in these rolls that female ancestry was generally considered unimportant, with the notable exception of the Plantagenet kings’ Anglo-Saxon ancestry through Edith/Mathilda.

Concerning the anomalies, the most obvious examples of individuals who would not have been represented in these diagrams if they had been proper genealogies of blood-lines only, include king Brihttric of Wessex, at the very beginning of the genealogy, alongside his successor Egbert; the three Danish kings, Cnut and his two sons (fig. 14); and Harold Godwineson. This

Fig. 14. Royal MS.14 B. VI, detail of membrane 4, middle part, showing the three Danish kings and king Edward the Confessor.
is a clear indication that royal blood lineage was not the sole concern of those who made or read these rolls. They were also eager to show all the kings who had actually reigned in England since Egbert, whatever their legitimacy (in some cases denied in the commentary) and whether or not they were blood-related to the main royal dynasty. The result is a strange combination of a royal genealogy and a regnal list. Finally, as important as the visible connecting lines between the medallions, sometimes slanting, even unnecessarily meandering in places in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, is the straight vertical, yet invisible, line along which are aligned almost all the ‘royal’ medallions in the central part of the roll. What Ursula Nilgen has termed *Amtsgenealogie*, genealogy of office, is here as important as the more traditional familial genealogy. This layout, as well as the choice of the roll format, may have been intended as a way of compensating the unconcealed breaks of continuity as regards the hereditary devolution of the English crown, first in 1016 and then twice in 1066.

**A full display of the royal majesty … with a subtle hierarchy?**

The role of the pictures in the medallions of the genealogical rolls such as the Royal rolls has long been overlooked or underplayed. They have been considered too often as purely ‘recreational’ stereotyped figures devoid of any meaning. It is true that they are certainly not portraits in the sense that is understood today. And, when the name of the king is not written in the upper edge, as in Royal MS. 14 B. V, there is no means of identifying the king depicted in a medallion without referring upward to the smaller medallion where he is shown as the child of a preceding king (when it occurs) or to the corresponding paragraph in the commentary. Even the hare which is shown in both Royal rolls on the knees of king Harold I (Cnut’s son) (fig. 15), which is

![Fig. 15a](image1)

![Fig. 15b](image2)

**Fig. 15a, b.** The ‘royal’ medallion of king ‘Harefoot’ with a hare in his arms in Royal MS. 14 B. V, membrane 4, and Royal MS. 14 B. VI, membrane 4.

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clearly a pun on his nickname, ‘Harefoot’, can only act as a mnemonic marker after one has read the text at least once. The same, in Royal MS. 14 B. V alone, applies to the hawk settled on the bench where king Edward the Martyr is seated, which probably alludes to the fact, mentioned in the commentary, that he was murdered by his stepmother when halting at her place after a hunting party. In Royal MS. 14 B. VI, curiously, it is his father Edgar who is depicted with a hawk on his left fist, whereas Edward the Martyr is shown with his chest pierced by an arrow (a choice which would be more appropriate for William Rufus, who actually was killed by an arrow while hunting in the New Forest and who is sometimes portrayed in this way in other rolls or manuscripts). Such pictorial allusions are only occasional (we can add to the list, in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, king Æthelwulf offering gold coins to God, an allusion to ‘Peter’s pence’; king Cnut holding a huge battle-axe; king Edward the Confessor holding his crown out to God; Henry III blessing a huge Church placed on his left, an allusion to the re-foundation of Westminster Abbey) and they never disclose in themselves the identity of any individual king in the diagram.

In spite of their much standardized aspect, these portraits have, in my opinion, a deeper significance. First of all, one cannot but be impressed by the striking accumulation, in such a narrow space, of so many kings always endowed with most of their kingly attributes: they are all enthroned (even if, in these two rolls, their thrones usually are simple benches); they all wear a crown (always painted in gold in Royal MS. 14 B. V); and many of them hold a sceptre or a sword (or both, as do only a few of them, such as Æthelberht, Æthelred I and Edward I (fig. 16) in Royal MS. 14 B. VI). These pictures do not differ greatly from those which were probably the most widespread royal images at that time, those visible on the Great Seal of England since the reign of Edward the Confessor. What better demonstration of the predominant role of kingship in English history than this full display of royal majesty? Once more, it is the kingly status in itself which is heightened by this pictorial choice, and it is important to note that no king (not even the usurpers such as the Danish kings, Harold or Stephen, or the worst of them in moral or religious behaviour such as Eadwig or William Rufus) is overtly denied this royal dignity in picture. Visually, these genealogical rolls offer types of variations on the theme of the royal majesty. And the original graphic device of duplicating the medallions of one and the same individual, represented first as a child, and then as a king (a device common to most rolls, even the unillustrated ones), apparently gains a new significance in illustrated rolls: it looks as if the very nature of individuals changed when they ascended to the throne. Moreover, the omnipresence of pictures of the kings resembling those found on their seals was an additional means of increasing the impression of authority exuded by these rolls and, to some extent, a way of authenticating the roll’s content in the reader’s eyes.

A less impressive church is also visible on the right of the same king Henry III in Royal MS. 14 B. V.
Yet, beyond the overall praise of the royal office, this series of miniatures uses various graphic devices to show the affiliation of a certain king to a particular broad category of rulers or to suggest that he was an example of good or bad kingship. In some other rolls, the main means used in this matter are the kings’ attributes (type and number) and, less often, their positions. It is apparently not the case in the Royal rolls. Admittedly, when most kings are represented empty-handed or holding a sceptre, as in Royal MS. 14 B. V, the only two kings to hold a sword, Edmond Ironside and Richard the Lionheart, are inevitably singled out as warlike kings, which is confirmed by the insistence on their prowess in the commentary. But there is no apparent explanation for the list of the sceptred kings, who do not seem to be regarded as more powerful than the others. In a similar way, there is no clear justification for the distinction, in Royal MS. 14 B. VI, between the kings with a sceptre and the kings with a sword (apart from Richard the Lionheart, who is not simply holding his sword, like so many others, but drawing it out of its scabbard, which is a clear indication of his martial temper!) (fig. 17). And some attributes are even more puzzling, such as the scales placed in Egbert’s left hand (fig. 18): there is not the slightest allusion in the commentary to his sense of justice nor to his concern for good justice (unlike the paragraphs dealing with Edgar, or even Cnut!). And there is no other use of this symbol as a royal attribute in any other roll.

As for the head or body positions, they have no more obvious meaning, if we except William Rufus’s face seen in profile in Royal MS. 14 B. V, a feature which nearly always has a negative connotation in medieval images, particularly when representing a king in majesty. Another position is more ambiguous and does not necessarily have an unequivocal meaning: when someone exercising authority is depicted with one leg placed on the other knee, which is different from having legs crossed at ankle level, this can indicate either a greater authority or an abuse of power (for instance, Herod ordering his soldiers to kill the Holy Innocents is very often depicted in this way). Yet, if we look at both Royal rolls, this does not seem to fit with

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this meaning. In Royal MS. 14 B. V, if we leave aside Æthelwulf and Edred, who both have their right leg on their left knee and are turned to their right (an unclear meaning, but both kings are praised for their piety), the list of the kings depicted in this way includes Egbert, Æthelred I, Eadwig, Æthelred II, Cnut and Henry II. It is difficult to see what these kings could have had in common in the draughtman’s eyes! The first one and the last two had to fight to gain their crown and are portrayed as conquerors. But it is difficult to put the two Æthelred in this same category (even if they both had to fight against invaders), not to speak of Eadwig, probably the worst kings in the whole of English history if we are to believe the commentary. The only common feature between all these kings would be the violent means to which they had to resort to get or to keep their throne. Anyway, the absence of William the Conqueror from this group makes this hypothesis very dubious. In Royal MS. 14 B. VI, the equivalent list is just as puzzling. Apart from Edred, once more in a slightly different position since he is turned to his right, and Richard the Lionheart who, like Edred, has his left leg crossed over the right, the following kings have all the inverted position (the right leg over the left): Æthelberht (Æthelwulf’s second son), Edmund I, Edward the Martyr, Cnut, Harold Godwineson and William Rufus. Here again, we find in the same group very different kings! Four of them only have in common that they died a violent death (which is also true of Richard the Lionheart), but this is not the case for Æthelberht or Cnut. So, if there was a visual code, it was not consistently followed – or clearly understood – by those who drew the figures.

As for colours, there is no universal code which would be understandable by everyone in medieval Europe at first sight. As Michel Pastoureau has often stressed, what is most important in this matter is the deviation from the norm.29 This is perfectly visible in Royal MS. 14 B. V. First, all royal medallions have a background painted with gold, with three exceptions: those of Brithric (red-ochre), Stephen and John (blue with only some small golden discs) (fig. 19). This could very well indicate a lesser dignity or dubious legitimacy: Brithric was only ‘one of the five petty kings in England when the land was divided in five kingdoms’, before the unification by Egbert; Stephen is said to have reigned wrongly (‘à tort’) and contrary to his former oath of loyalty to Mathilda (‘encontre leal serment’) and to have retained the crown only in war and trouble (‘retint la corone tut le tens de sa vie en guerre e en travail’); and John is overtly criticized for having been incapable of preserving his kingdom’s sovereignty and the territorial integrity of his continental possessions: ‘Alas! What grief! Among all Christian kings, he was previously the most free, and from his own degree he made himself serf, and made the glorious realm of England a tributary. And when he had reigned eighteen years and five months, after much of tribulation, and divers labours, and the losses of his lands beyond sea, he departed from this world in great bitterness of thought’.30

Moreover, another colour code seem to have been intended in this same roll: most kings have a combination of red and blue clothes, and these two colours are obviously considered as royal colours, since they are alternatively used (with small golden discs) inside the connecting lines between the medallions of rulers first as children and then as kings. Inevitably, the rare kings who have not been considered as worthy of these ‘royal colours’ are somehow belittled; they are granted a lesser authority, an ‘incomplete majesty’. This is corroborated by the commentary, which generally signals either that their power was contested or that they misused it: Brithric,

29 See for instance M. Pastoureau, ‘Symbole’, in Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (eds.), Dictionnaire raisonné de l’Occident médiéval (Paris, 1999), pp. 1097-1112 (p. 1104): ‘Aux modes de pensée analogiques et aux spéculations de type étymologique, le symbolisme médiéval ajoute souvent des procédés que l’on pourrait qualifier de “sémiologiques”, spécialement dans les images et dans les textes littéraires. Il s’agit de formules, quelquefois mécaniques et d’autres fois fort subtils, portant sur la distribution, la répartition, l’association ou l’opposition de différents éléments à l’intérieur d’un ensemble. Le procédé le plus fréquent est celui de l’écart: dans une liste ou dans un groupe, un personnage, un animal ou un objet est exactement semblable à tous les autres à un petit détail près; or c’est ce petit détail qui le met en valeur et qui lui donne sa signification, laudative ou péjorative.’

30 This is Thomas Wright’s translation.
Fig. 19a, b  Royal MS.14 B.V, parallel views of a detail of membrane 5 showing the last three kings (Henry I, Stephen and Henry II) and of a detail of membrane 6 showing the two first ‘royal’ medallions of Richard the Lionheart and King John.
Æthelwulf, Edmund I, Eadwig, Edward the Martyr, Stephen and John. It is worth pointing out that this list partly overlaps with the previous one. The only intriguing presence in this list is Æthelwulf, unless his offering to the pope of Peter’s pence was seen as a precedent for John’s giving his kingdom as a fief to the papacy, as a decision threatening future England’s independence.

In Royal MS. 14 B. VI, it is apparently through a similar device that a hierarchy is suggested and that weaker or less worthy kings are stigmatized. Instead of a medallion with a golden background, they are only given one with a blue background (with a combination of green and ochre or pale red clothes) (fig. 20). The only anomaly in this respect is King Alfred’s medallion,

![Fig. 20. Royal MS.14 B. VI, detail of membrane 3 showing the four ‘royal’ medallions from Edwyn to](image)
even if the account of his reign ends by mentioning evasively that ‘he reigned twenty-eight years and a half in great trouble’ (‘en grant travail’). All the other kings in this group, subtly deprived of a full royal majesty, are portrayed in the commentary as kings of lesser power, dignity or legitimacy: Æthelwulf, Æthelbald, Edmund I, Eadwig, Edward the Martyr, Harthacnut, Harold Godwineson, William Rufus and John (many of them having also died a violent death).

Finally, while asserting the prestige of royal office and its utmost importance in the continuity of English history, the genealogical rolls act as some sort of ‘mirrors of princes’ aiming at instructing rulers on certain aspects of rule and behaviour and at creating images of kings for imitation or avoidance. Those people – unknown to us – who designed or promoted these rolls deliberately chose not to present all the kings of England as models of good government or moral behaviour. Events or traits which have been selected in the very short accounts of their reigns are used to exemplify (as in the exempla found in sermons) the political, moral and religious qualities essential for ruling the glorious realm of England.
In conclusion, it seems possible to say that, even if they were not intended as tools for propaganda, the genealogical rolls were nevertheless very efficient vehicles for royal propaganda, that is the promotion of a monarchy (if not properly speaking a dynasty) whose history was fundamentally inseparable from – and interwoven with – the country’s history. For several generations, these rolls could have played the role of an ‘authorized version’ of English history outside monastic circles. This raises the question of their possible audience. Since we have no precise indication of authorship or ownership, we have to use the slightest clues available.

Each of the two Royal rolls offers a different one. At the lower end of Royal MS. 14 B. V, there are two barely visible sketches, drawn in plummet, of women’s heads facing each other (fig. 21), accompanied by a now almost illegible short rubric in which the scribe apparently laments the short time he had been allowed to complete his task. This has led William Monroe to suggest that the two figures could be the ladies who commissioned the roll.\textsuperscript{31} Even if this cannot be more than a – tempting – hypothesis, it could be confirmed by the unusual attention given to some women of the royal family in the continuations of some other rolls. For instance, the very beginning of the continuation of Royal MS. 14 B. VI evokes the memory of Eleanor of Provence and records that she entered the nunnery of Amesbury. The common continuation of four other illustrated rolls (including the Chaworth roll) specifies that Mary, one of Edward I’s daughters, entered the same nunnery. This could be an indication of one of the places where the original impetus for the production of these rolls could have been given. There is also in the common commentary of the rolls a very interesting and unusual paragraph devoted to ‘Alfled la Sage’ (/Æthelflaed, ‘the Lady of the Mercians’), Alfred’s daughter, stressing her genuinely political role in helping her brother Edward to rule the kingdom of England, that suggests that the rolls were not intended exclusively for a male readership!

\textsuperscript{31} W. H. Monroe, op. cit., p. 322.
The continuation of Royal MS. 14 B. VI (fig. 22), written down shortly after 1340 (at least thirty-three years after the roll had been originally made, and probably more), gives a different clue as to its audience (as continuations very often do), since it reflects what the then owner actually thought of recent events. First, it supports unambiguously Edward III’s recent claim to the French throne, drawing on a very detailed (genealogical) line of argument (which was that of the king himself).

Fig. 22. Royal MS.14 B. VI, membrane 6, showing the continuation from the medallion of king Edward I to the end of the roll.

And because it was the opinion of Edward, son of Isabel, that his right was stronger by way of inheritance, since the king’s sister is nearer in line than his uncle’s son, then the aforesaid Edward claimed the kingdom of France and entered this realm to conquer his right by might and Flanders submitted to him as to their sovereign lord. Hence Edward had himself called king of France and England and quartered his arms.

What is even more interesting is that the author of the continuation (or the owner of the roll) had perfectly understood the full implications of the central
demonstration in these rolls, bemoaning that king Edward III (and implicitly his two predecessors) had decided to be thus numbered in official documents:

This Edward had himself called Edward the third after the Conquest, that is to say after William the Bastard, in his letters and charters, and in some people’s opinion it was not at all to his or his ancestors’ credit, since conquest by might never gives right [‘pur ceco que conquest par force ne done james droit’]; but it would be more appropriate for him to invoke a right going back to before the Conquest, otherwise he and all his successors should be considered as owners by fraud and intruders [‘mes covendreit que il hust hu dreit devant le Conquest, car autrement li et tuz ses successours huissent este possessours de male foy et entrusours’].

This was not an innocent or anecdotal point, but much rather an in-depth, if short, consideration of the legitimacy issue. In his opinion, since there had already been three kings named Edward before the Norman conquest, and since the original genealogical diagram’s main purpose in this very roll (as its author(s) had spared no effort to make clear) was to demonstrate the blood kinship between Anglo-Saxon kings and Plantagenet kings, it would have been more consistent and more suitable for the three Edwards after the Conquest to have had themselves called Edward IV, Edward V and Edward VI … (as some copyists did in a few other rolls), thus emphasizing the continuity of the English monarchy and strengthening their own legitimacy.

In a way, judging from this anonymous continuator’s very sensible reflection, readers of such rolls as the two Royal rolls, at least some of them, could be well defined as being (using a French phrase much later invented by Chateaubriand) ‘plus royalistes que le roi’, more royalist than the king. Apparently the English equivalent is ‘more Catholic than the Pope’, but the play on words would have been less colourful and less appropriate in this Royal manuscripts conference.