COLOUR NOTES IN ENGLISH ROMANESQUE MANUSCRIPTS

ANDREAS PETZOLD

Colour notes, indicating the colour to be used, have been recorded by Patricia Stirnemann in a group of late twelfth and early thirteenth-century French manuscripts. L. Gilissen has noted two other methods for indicating colour used in a group of thirteenth-century Cistercian manuscripts. One of these consists of writing the guide-letter (that is the instruction left by the scribe to indicate which illuminated letter should be inserted in the empty space) in the same colour as that required for the initial and the other of placing a coloured mark adjacent to the guide-letter, again in the same colour as that required for the initial. The purpose of this article is to describe colour notes similar to those observed by Stirnemann, but found in manuscripts produced in England in the late eleventh century and throughout the twelfth, and to consider their significance primarily in relation to Stirnemann’s findings.

The present study arose out of a general survey of colour and technique in English Romanesque manuscript illumination. While engaged in this the author noted what appeared to be colour notes in Hereford Cathedral Library, MS.O.1.VIII, a manuscript probably produced at St Albans circa 1120. These consist of the letters ‘a’, ‘r’ and ‘v’ and relate respectively to blue, red and green arabesque and minor initials (see fig. 1). From this it is inferred that they refer respectively to ‘azurus’ or ‘azur’, ‘rubeus’ or ‘rouge’ and ‘viridis’ or ‘vert’ (see Appendix B). They are written in lead-point and systematically used throughout the manuscript.

The search for colour notes was, subsequently, extended to include a representative sample of English manuscripts with decoration produced in the period circa 1066-1200. In all some 300 manuscripts were examined. Of these twenty-seven had colour notes; a further three manuscripts containing colour notes were brought to the author’s attention. These manuscripts are listed in Appendix A with their probable place of origin and approximate date. This low incidence of survival may possibly be ascribed to the fact that in many cases the colour notes were erased when the decoration was finished, were destroyed when the quires were cropped in contemporary or later bindings, or are concealed underneath the paint surface.

As in the case of Hereford Cathedral Library, MS.O.1.VIII, the colour notes found in the other manuscripts in Appendix A usually consist of a single letter, such as ‘a’, ‘r’ or ‘v’, which is intended to serve as an abbreviation for a colour term. In only one case...
Fig. 1. In the left hand margin ‘a’ stands adjacent to a blue initial ‘N’ and ‘r’ to a red initial ‘P’. Hereford Cathedral Library, MS.O.1.VIII, f. 13v. By permission of the Dean and Chapter

Fig. 2. The ‘a’ in the far left hand margin relates to the blue letter shape of the initial ‘Q’. Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS. 154, f. 113v. By kind permission of the Master and Fellows

Fig. 3. The figure 6 configuration in the far right hand margin, probably a ‘b’, relates to the brown initial ‘H’ on the left. BL, Royal MS. 7 F.VI, f. 113
is the colour note specified in words rather than by a single letter, and this is in the Puiset Bible, where the note 'de auro' occurs in the margin adjacent to the initial to Thessalonians (f. 133). Colour notes are usually written in either lead or hard point, or more rarely black or coloured ink. When found with arabesque or minor initials they are generally located either immediately adjacent to the initial or in the margin, but when found with historiated initials they are incorporated into the body of the initial.

In several manuscripts (e.g. nos. 8, 13, 14, 26 and 28) the colour notes relate to the letter-structure of the initial and not to the ornamental foliage within or surrounding it. The colour note 'a', for instance, on f. 113v of Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS. 154 (fig. 2), relates to the blue letter-structure of the initial Q and not to the multicoloured floral ornament within it. In one manuscript (Oxford, Balliol College, MS. 156) the colour notes relate not only to the letter-structure of the initial, but also to the framing device by which it is enclosed. The colour notes 'r' and 'a', for instance, on f. 135v (fig. 4), relate respectively to the red letter-structure of the initial D and to the blue frame surrounding it.

The colour notes are readily distinguishable from either the contemporary corrections and guide-letters or the later marginal accretions, such as annotations and added chapter divisions. Sometimes, both guide-letters and colour notes can be found together. This may be seen, for instance, in BL, Royal MS. 7 F. VI, a Cirencester manuscript dating from circa 1170. An example of it occurs at the bottom of f. 113 (fig. 3) where the guide-letter 'h' written in ink and the colour note 'b' for 'brunus' or 'brun' written in lead-point stand adjacent to one another and relate to the brown initial H.

In all the manuscripts listed in Appendix A the colour notes relate to initials and in the vast majority of cases these are arabesque or minor initials. In only two manuscripts (nos. 22 and 30) are colour notes found in the context of historiated initials. In several manuscripts (e.g. nos. 2, 14, 19 and 21) containing a combination of historiated, arabesque and minor initials the colour notes only relate to the last two. In BL, Cotton MS. Claudius E. V (no. 14), for instance, the colour notes do not refer to the impressive array of historiated initials at the beginning of the manuscript, but to the arabesque and minor initials from f. 57 to the end.

One example of a historiated initial containing colour notes, first published by Christopher de Hamel, is that of the large P prefacing Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Auct. D.1.13. Here, they are probably still visible only because of the use of the tinted drawing technique. In the body of this initial the colour notes 'a', 'r', 'v' and 'g' can be seen written in a small hand in black ink; the first three refer respectively to blue, red and green colours, but the fourth, the 'g' found only on the mantle of St Peter, refers to the same red, probably vermilion, as the 'r'. It may be that in this instance the painter of this initial had no access to the pigment specified by the colour note and used a substitute.

The three earliest manuscripts in Appendix A all appear to have been written in the late eleventh century. They are: (i) Cambridge University Library, MS. Ii.3-33, (ii) Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 451 and (iii) BL, Harl. MS. 652, though here
the colour notes are only in that part of the manuscript written in a mature, Christ
Church hand. An example of colour notes in these manuscripts may be seen on f.120v
of MS. Ii.3.33 (see fig. 5). Here, the notes ‘r’ and ‘g’ written in red ink (as is also the
case in MS. Bodley 451) and located in the left margin relate respectively to the red and
green minor initials D and Q. They appear in the case of the ‘r’ to refer to either ‘rubeus’
or ‘rouge’ or possibly the English colour term ‘read’, and in that of the ‘g’ most
probably to the English ‘grene’. These colour notes appear to have been written by the
scribe as is the case with the other two manuscripts. In the manuscripts of a later date
in Appendix A, the hand in which the colour notes are written usually does not appear
to be that of the scribe.

A high proportion of the manuscripts in Appendix A came from the major Benedictine
houses, such as Christ Church, Canterbury (nos. 2, 6, 7, 9, 14 and 19) or St Albans
(nos. 3, 11, 21 and 26). An example of the former is Cambridge University Library, MS.
Ii.3.33, and of the latter Hereford Cathedral Library, MS.O.1.VIII.

Another distinctive group of manuscripts containing colour notes came from
Cistercian houses (nos. 4, 5, 8, 18, 26, 27 and 28). An example of this group is Royal
MS. 6 C. VIII, which was probably produced at Rievaulx circa 1170. This contains the
colour notes ‘a’, ‘r’ and ‘v’. On f. 59 (see fig. 6), for instance, the colour note ‘r’ may
be seen in the margin adjacent to a large red arabesque initial A.

Appendix B contains a list of the colour notes arranged according to their position in
the alphabet with the colours to which they refer and the colour terms for which, it is
suggested, they stand as abbreviations. Several tentative conclusions may be made

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*Fig. 4. Letters ‘R’ and ‘A’ in the left hand margin, adjacent to the initial ‘D’. Oxford, Balliol
College, MS. 156, f. 135v. By permission of the Master and Fellows*
Fig. 5. The ‘r’ stands adjacent to a red initial ‘D’ and the ‘g’ to a green initial ‘Q’. Cambridge University Library, MS. ii.1-33, f. 120v. By permission of the Syndics

Fig. 6. The ‘R’ in the right hand margin relates to the red arabesque initial ‘A’. BL, Royal MS. 6 C.VIII, f. 59

centering the information contained in this list. Firstly, in the majority of cases the colour notes appear to refer to abstract colour terms rather than concrete pigments or colorants. Secondly, in the majority of cases the colour notes could refer to either French or Latin colour terms. The letter ‘v’, for instance, when it refers to a green colour, may stand either for the Latin colour term ‘viridis’ or for the French ‘vert’. The use of the
colour note 'ro' to refer to red in certain of the initials in Oxford, Balliol College, MS. 156, indicates that French was in use. Finally, three of the colour notes, the 'r', 'g' and 'w', may refer to English colour terms. The 'r' could possibly refer to the English colour term 'read', while the most probable explanation for the 'g' is that it refers to the English colour term 'grene'. Of the seven manuscripts in which the 'g' is found (nos. 6, 7, 14, 15, 19, 20 and 25) five of them were produced before 1120 when one would have expected English still to have been spoken in monastic communities. Four of the manuscripts come from Canterbury (nos. 6, 7, 14 and 15) where there was an impressive library of books in English surviving after the Conquest. The letter 'w' found adjacent to maroon-coloured initials (nos. 16 and 17) is more difficult to interpret, but it most probably refers to an English colour term, such as 'wapen' meaning purple-blue and usually used in conjunction with textiles. If this interpretation of the colour notes 'r', 'g' and 'w' is correct then it indicates that English-speaking artisans were employed after the Conquest in the writing and decorating of manuscripts.

Stirnemann gave two explanations for the function of colour notes. Firstly, she suggested that they served as aides-mémoire to the illuminator, when the writing of the quires had been completed, and it was necessary to dismantle the separate sheets to decorate them. Secondly, she suggested that they were intended as instructions to an assistant. The author is inclined to this second view. This is because in certain cases the colour notes relate to the letter-structure of initials and not to the coloured floral ornament within or surrounding them, which suggests a division of labour. This is the case, for instance, with the initials in MS. Pembroke 154 (see fig. 2). There, it may indicate that the main artist was responsible for putting down the colour instruction, possibly making the outline of the letter and painting and drawing the floral ornament; the simple task of painting in the letter could then have been left to an assistant. This interpretation raises the important question of how an artist or scribe learnt his skill. Why was it thought necessary to write down these instructions rather than give them by word of mouth? Perhaps this indicates that the writer of the instructions had moved to another workshop or that the workshop was so large that it was more efficient for its head to indicate his wishes in writing.

Stirnemann related the presence of colour notes amongst other markings in the manuscripts examined by her to an important development in the history of manuscript production – the transition from monastic to lay production centres. Her suggestion must clearly be revised in view of the widespread use of colour notes in monastic scriptoria in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries demonstrated here. An important question concerning the colour notes discussed above is whether they can be related to specific developments, which took place in the Romanesque period, or whether their use can be traced back much earlier. In England specific developments to which they might possibly be related include a vast increase in the output of manuscripts with decoration, the emergence of production centres with their own distinctive house styles, and the greater use of secular, itinerant labour. But this question cannot be satisfactorily considered until an exhaustive examination of earlier manuscripts has taken place. The
search might be extended back to Norman, Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian manuscripts. For practical reasons such an ambitious project lies beyond the scope of this article; its more modest aim is to encourage the reader to look out for colour notes when examining manuscripts.

APPENDIX A

A LOCATION LIST OF MANUSCRIPTS CONTAINING COLOUR NOTES

The probable place of origin or earliest provenance and approximate date of each manuscript, together with the colours to which notes refer, are given in brackets.

**Manuscript**

Aberdeen, University Library:
(1) MS. 24 (circa 1200)

Cambridge, University Library:
(2) MS. Dd. 1.4 (Christ Church, Canterbury; circa 1130)
(3) MS. Dd. 8.6 (St Albans; circa 1150)
(4) MS. Dd. 13.4 (Kirkstead; late twelfth century)
(5) MS. Kk. 4.15 (Louth Park; late twelfth century)
(6) MS. Li. 1.41 (Christ Church, Canterbury; circa 1120)
(7) MS. Li. 3.33 (Christ Church, Canterbury; circa 1090)

Cambridge, Pembroke College:
(8) MS. 154 (Buildwas; late twelfth century)

Cambridge, Trinity College:
(9) MS. B. 4.28 (Christ Church, Canterbury; circa 1120)

Durham Cathedral Library:
(10) MS. A. II. I, vol. I, f. 133 (Durham; circa 1180)

Hereford Cathedral Library:
(11) MS. O. I. VIII (St Albans; circa 1120)

Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit:
(12) MS. Lat. 76a (Northern England; circa 1190)

London, British Library:
(13) Add. MS. 38816 ff. 1–117v (York; late twelfth century)
(14) Cotton MS. Claudius E. V, ff. 57–216 (Christ Church, Canterbury; circa 1120)
(15) Harl. MS. 652 (St Augustine's, Canterbury; circa 1090)
(16) Harl. MS. 3680 (Rochester; early twelfth century)

**Colour note**

(1) a (blue), v (pink)
(2) a (blue), r (red)
(3) r (red), v (green)
(4) a (blue), b (red), v (green)
(5) a (blue), r (red), v (green)
(6) g (green), r (red)
(7) g (green), r (red)
(8) a (blue), r (red), v (green)
(9) r (red), f (purple), v (green)
(10) de auro
(11) a (blue), r (red), v (green)
(12) a (blue), p (purple)
(13) r (red) and o (gold)
(14) a (blue), g (green), p (purple)
(15) a (blue), g (green), r (red)
(16) r (red), w (maroon), v (green)
APPENDIX B

A LIST OF COLOUR NOTES FOUND IN THE MANUSCRIPTS IN APPENDIX A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour note</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
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<td>Azur Azurus</td>
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<tr>
<td>de auro</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>b</td>
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<td>Colour note</td>
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<td>w</td>
<td>Waeden</td>
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</table>

I would like to thank the following: Mr Michael Gullick, who generously drew my attention to several examples of colour notes, Professor Michael Kauffmann, Dr Jennie Sheppard, Dr Patricia Stirnemann, Professor Jonathan Alexander and Professor Ian Short.


4 R. M. Thomson, Manuscripts from St Albans Abbey, 1066–1235 (Woodbridge, 1982), no. 78.

5 Colour notes written in a similar, if not the same, hand may be seen in another closely related St Albans manuscript, Oxford, Christ Church, MS. 115 (Thomson, op. cit., no. 58).

6 Ker’s list of manuscripts from English monastic houses was followed; see N. R. Ker, Medieval Libraries of Great Britain (London 1964). Manuscripts were examined from the following libraries: (i) London, the British Library, (ii) Oxford, the Bodleian Library, and (iii) Cambridge, the University Library. In the case of Cistercian manuscripts certain Oxford and Cambridge college libraries were also consulted.

7 Nos. 1, 10 and 29 in Appendix A.

8 R. A. B. Mynors, Durham Cathedral Manuscripts to the End of the Twelfth Century (Oxford, 1939), p. 85; this was discussed by Professor Jonathan Alexander in his unpublished Lyell Lectures given in May 1983.


10 On guide-letters, see Gilissen, art. cit.


14 C. R. Dodwell, The Canterbury School of Illumination 1066–1200 (Cambridge, 1954), p. 120.


17 For Christ Church, Canterbury see Dodwell, op. cit., p. 120, n. 14. For St Albans, see Thomson, op. cit., n. 4.

18 Provenances for Cistercian manuscripts given by Ker, *Medieval Libraries*, have been followed.


23 Stirnemann, art. cit.

24 Initials in a similar, if not the same, hand may be seen in Oxford, Balliol College, MSS. 9 and 23.

25 Stirnemann, art. cit., p. 955: ‘un maillon supplémentaire à la chaîne des changements qui marquent la transition du scriptorium monastique à la production laïque’.

26 See R. Thomson, ‘The Norman Conquest and English libraries’, p. 27, in P. Ganz (ed.), *The Role of the Book in Medieval Culture* (Turnhout, 1986), vol. ii, pp. 27ff. Stirnemann, art. cit., in a postscript cites two letters in which colour notes occur in two earlier manuscripts. The first of these, described by J. Vezin, is a tenth-century Iberian manuscript, Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, MS. 8. The second is a model book inserted in a ‘Psychomachia’ of Prudentius; see E. Vergnolle, ‘Un carnet des modèles de l’an mil originaire de Saint Benoît sur Loire (Paris, B. N., MS. lat. 8318 et Roma, Vat. Reg. Lat. 569)’, *Arte Medievale*, ii (1985), pp. 23ff. But the colour notes there are colour abbreviations intended as a permanent feature to indicate to the reader which colours were used in the original source upon which the copy in the model book is based. A similar phenomenon may be seen in a slightly later model book (Leiden, University Library, cod. Voss. Lat. Oct. 15) which contains a series of illustrations to Aesop’s Fables; see G. Thiele, *Der illustrierte lateinische Aesop in der Handschrift des Adehemar* (Leiden, 1905). In this the drawings are done in pen and ink and the colours of the original source indicated by means of abbreviated notes.

27 F. Avril and P. Stirnemann, *Manuscrits enluminés d’origine insulaire VIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris, 1987), in their list of seventy-five English manuscripts produced before 1200 noted only one containing colour notes and this was of the late twelfth century (no. 66: Paris, B. N., MS. lat. 6048).

28 P. Stirnemann and M. Gousset in an unpublished lecture noted that Paris, B. N., MS. lat. 2088, a manuscript from Fécamp or Mont St Michel dating from between 1055 and 1080, contains the following colour notes: an ‘a’ adjacent to gold for ‘aurum’, an ‘l’ adjacent to blue for ‘lazurium’, an ‘m’ adjacent to red for ‘minimum’, and a ‘v’ adjacent to green for ‘vert’ or ‘viridis’.