THE EXTENT OF FIRE DAMAGE TO MIDDLE ENGLISH PROSE IN THE COTTON LIBRARY*

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ABSTRACT

The library of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1570/1-1631) has been described as the most important collection of manuscripts assembled by a single person in Britain. The collection was partly destroyed in a library fire in 1731. While the Cotton collection has been celebrated (and the damage it suffered lamented) for its Old English manuscripts, the extent of fire damage to Middle English prose within the collection has not been systematically explored. This article aims to address this gap by conducting a comprehensive comparison of surviving manuscripts which are now part of the Cotton collection in the British Library with surviving pre- and post-fire catalogues, book lists and reports of Cotton's manuscripts. The investigation was undertaken during the compilation of an *Index of Middle English Prose* (*IMEP*) volume dedicated to the Cotton collection.

KEYWORDS: Middle English, *Index of Middle English Prose*, Manuscript Studies, Cotton library, bibliography.

EL ALCANCE DEL DAÑO POR FUEGO EN LA PROSA EN INGLÉS MEDIO
DE LA BIBLIOTECA COTTON

RESUMEN

La biblioteca de Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1570/1-1631) ha sido descrita como la colección de manuscritos más importante reunida por una sola persona en Gran Bretaña. La colección fue parcialmente destruida en un incendio en 1731. Si bien la colección Cotton ha sido celebrada (y el daño que sufrió, lamentado) por sus manuscritos en inglés antiguo, el alcance del daño causado por el fuego en la prosa en inglés medio de la colección no se ha estudiado sistemáticamente. Este artículo tiene como objetivo abordar dicho vacío mediante una comparación exhaustiva de los manuscritos que sobrevivieron y que ahora forman parte de la colección Cotton en la Biblioteca Británica con los catálogos, listas de libros e informes, existentes antes y después del incendio, de los manuscritos de Cotton. La investigación se llevó a cabo durante la compilación de un volumen para el *Index of Middle English Prose* (*IMEP*) dedicado a la colección Cotton.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inglés medio, *Index of Middle English Prose*, estudios de manuscritos, biblioteca Cotton, bibliografía.

1. INTRODUCTION

The library collected by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1570/1-1631), a politician, an antiquarian and one of the central figures of Renaissance England, along with his two descendants, was partly destroyed in a notorious library fire in 1731. The Cotton collection is particularly renowned for its Old English (OE) and early medieval Anglo-Latin manuscripts, which have been extensively studied in relation to fire losses (e.g., Kiernan 1981; Keynes 1996; Dunning, Hudson and Duffy 2018). However, the collection also includes a considerable number of texts written in what we now call Middle English (ME), encompassing especially documentary texts and historical chronicles. Unlike OE, there has been no systematic survey to assess the extent of ME prose lost in the library fire. This article aims to address this gap in scholarship and present a comprehensive investigation into the loss of ME prose within the Cotton collection.

I have undertaken this work as a part of the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action *Index of Middle English Prose: Digital Cotton Catalogue Project*. The *Index of Middle English Prose* (*IMEP*) is the main reference tool for ME non-verse texts. Its objective is to comprehensively locate and identify all surviving English prose texts composed between c. 1200 and 1500 (see Rand 2014). The present survey is a byproduct of my archival work. It aims to answer two main questions:

(1) Which ME prose works were completely lost due to fire damage or survive only as fragments?

(2) Which ME prose works suffered damage resulting in the loss of certain portions, but remain partially readable?

The article will provide a useful source of information for people working with ME prose in the Cotton collection. Additionally, it will be of interest to anyone seeking knowledge about the collection itself and the repercussions of the library fire.

The paper is structured as follows. Subsection 2.1 presents the Cotton library. In subsections 2.2 and 2.3, the available pre-fire sources are discussed. The main post-fire sources used in this study are presented in subsection 2.4. Subsection 2.5 discusses the definition of ME and prose, which form the foundation of the present study. The focus of section 3 is on fire damage. Subsection 3.1 describes the overall extent of damage across different shelfmarks. Subsection 3.2 presents a list of ME prose works that were either lost completely or only survive as fragments. Subsection 3.3 lists ME prose works that experienced text loss but remain partially readable. Finally, section 4 concludes with insights into how much was lost and what it tells us about the Cotton collection.

2. EVIDENCE FOR COTTON'S MANUSCRIPTS

2.1. Our main sources for the Cotton collection

The Cotton library was owned and looked after by the Cotton family for three generations before becoming one of three founding collections of the British Museum (together with the Sloane and Harley collections). After the death of Sir Robert Cotton, the collection passed on to his son, Sir Thomas Cotton (1594-1662), and then to his grandson Sir John Cotton (1621-1702), both of whom added more manuscripts to the collection. On his death in 1702, Sir John donated the collection to Great Britain. As Great Britain would not have a national library until fifty years later, the manuscripts were placed under the custody of a board of trustees and moved between temporary storage locations, including the ominously named Ashburnham House, which is where the fire took place in 1731. After the fire and quick restoration efforts in the following months, the surviving manuscripts and fragments were put into temporary storage for twenty more years in Westminster School until 1753, when the British Museum was founded.[1] All these stages left behind records which can give us an idea of what was in the collection both before the fire and in its immediate aftermath. Unfortunately, neither pre- nor post-fire sources give us the complete picture.

The sources used in this study, both pre- and post-fire, encompass the following materials. The pre-fire sources comprise handwritten catalogues by Robert and Thomas Cotton themselves or their librarians.[2] Additionally, there are miscellaneous records such as loan slips, memoranda and correspondence pertaining to the collection. Most importantly, a printed catalogue by Rev. Thomas Smith ([1696] 1984), an Oxford scholar employed as a librarian by John Cotton, is also included among the pre-fire sources.[3]

In addition to the patchy pre-fire sources, I also consulted a number of post-fire sources. These sources include parliamentary reports on the fire damage, published in 1732, immediately following the fire, as well as reports from 1756 related to the foundation of the British Museum. Furthermore, a 1777 subject catalogue of the collection by Hooper[4] (1777) and a comprehensive catalogue by

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[1] For a more detailed account, see Prescott (1997, 391-400).
[2] Seven of these have been edited by Tite (2003): London, British Library, Harley MS 6018; Cambridgeshire, County Record Office, DR588/Z1; London, British Library, Harley MS 1879; London, British Library Additional MSS 35213 and 5161; London, British Library, Cotton Appendix MS XLV; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Smith MS 124.
[3] A digitised copy is available online at the British Library (BL) website: https://archive.org/details/ bub_gb_uUAv2HzUGxgC. A facsimile edition was published by Tite (Smith [1696] 1984) with the introductory essays translated from Latin into English.
[4] A digitised copy is available at the BL website: https://archive.org/details/ acataloguemanus00astlgoog.

Joseph Planta from 1802[5] were consulted. I also had available to me the unfinished draft for the *IMEP* Cotton volume by Brian Donaghey, who was working on the collection before his unfortunate passing in 2015. Additionally, a work-in-progress catalogue by Julian Harrison, the Lead Curator of pre-1500 manuscripts, was graciously provided for consultation.[6] Furthermore, modern scholarship on the manuscripts has been valuable, particularly the contributions of Tite (1980, 1992, 2003) and Prescott (1997).

2.2. Handwritten lists

During the lifetime of Sir Robert, and to a lesser degree that of his son and grandson, the Cotton library was a changing and evolving collection. Investigations into what was lost in the Cotton library fire are never straightforward as books were constantly added and removed, either on temporary loan or donated to someone.

Sir Robert was known as a forthcoming and well-connected collector, who was happy to show his library to scholars and lend out his books (Sharpe 1997, 9). His library was also located very centrally, especially after he purchased a house right next to the Parliament in Westminster (see Sharpe [1979] 2002, chapter 3; Tite 1992). Cotton was, however, not the most meticulous of librarians. He did not have a consistent system for keeping track of books that he added to his library or lent out to others, although he seems to have been aware of the need for such a resource towards the end of his life, since he promised in 1622 to send a catalogue of his books to Bishop Ussher when it was ready (cf. Sharpe 1997, 3). Unfortunately, no complete catalogue from Sir Robert's time has survived, leaving behind only a number of incomplete book lists.

The earliest and most substantial record of books from Sir Robert's lifetime is preserved in Harley 6018, ff. 147-191v (Tite 2003, 31-73). It is a collection of various shorter lists detailing the books that Cotton possessed, had lent out or was anticipating receiving. It contains a total of 413 entries, which represents less than half of the 958 volumes that were present in the library at the time of the 1731 fire (Tite 1980, 146-147; Sharpe 1997, 3).

According to Sharpe (1997, 3), Harley 6018 may have served as an unfinished draft for the catalogue that Cotton had been planning. However, it could be more accurately described as a collection of memoranda and ad hoc lists related to the library, lacking the intentional cataloguing principles aimed at achieving a full catalogue. The pages of Harley 6018 are on separate mounted leaves, and their original order has become impossible to ascertain (Tite 2003, 5). To complicate matters

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[5] A digitised copy is available at the BL website: https://archive.org/details/ACatalogueOfTheManuscripts1802.
[6] I am grateful to Dr Julian Harrison for his help during my time working at the BL in autumn 2021.

further, the manuscripts were not yet organised according to the famous emperor shelfmark system, which was only adopted in the final years of Sir Robert's life.

Among the other handwritten catalogues, there are several shorter ones, each with its own focus or specialisation. Cambridgeshire, County Record Office, DR588/Z1 (Tite 2003, 73-74), primarily lists historical materials related to Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, reflecting Cotton's own origins and research interests. BL Add. 5161, ff. 1r-9v (Tite 2003, 80), is a list of monastic cartularies and muniments in the Cotton library. The items are in alphabetical order, but also record the emperor shelfmarks next to the entries. Tite (2003, 80) dates the list to 1638-1639.

BL Harley 1879, f. 10v (Tite 2003, 74-76), contains a one-page list entitled "Books I want [...]," listing titles formerly in the collection of Lord Lumley (d. 1609), which had become available after his death. Additionally, f. 108v in the same MS contains a brief crossed-out list of five books that Sir Robert had lent out, along with a memorandum of six books that he had had bound in August 1612. BL Add. 35213, ff. 33r-77v (Tite 2003, 76-80), comprises a range of bibliographical records, including acquisitions for the Cotton library, but also contains "fragments or preparatory sections of catalogues, gathered together [...] in seemingly random fashion" (Tite 2003, 10).

Finally, there are two lists documenting items borrowed out from the collection. BL Cotton Appendix XLV, ff. 1-7 (Tite 2003, 80-89), records loans from Thomas Cotton's library between 1638 and 1661. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Smith MS 124 (Tite 2003, 5, 89-90) lists volumes borrowed by Thomas Smith, the author of the first printed catalogue, between 1662 and 1673. Except for Harley 6018 and the very miscellaneous Add. 35213 (which also includes titles not in the Cotton library), these lists are relatively short, consisting of only a handful of leaves.

2.3. The first printed catalogue

The first and only pre-fire catalogue intended to cover the whole collection was published in 1696 by Rev. Thomas Smith, an Oxford scholar, working as a librarian for Sir Robert's grandson, Sir John Cotton. This printed book is organised according to the emperor shelfmarks, with the majority of them still corresponding to the current arrangement, even if the occasional manuscript has changed its place. Unfortunately, Smith's work is not without omissions. It lists approximately 6,200 items, which is considerably fewer than the number listed by Planta (1802).[7] What is more, some of the missing items are among the most well-known ones in the collection today.

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[7] The vast majority of the additional items are correspondence and other documentary texts, which Planta (1802) catalogues meticulously. The Cotton collection contains thousands of documentary items from the sixteenth century, to the extent that it has been described as the site of state papers from the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

To illustrate this, we can take a closer look at Vitellius A XV (example 1) and Nero A X (example 2). Smith's description of the last three items in Vitellius A XV (Smith [1696] 1984, 83) reads as follows:

Example 1

4. Dialogus inter Saturnum & Solomonem, Saxonice.
'Dialogue between Saturn and Solomon, in Saxon.'
5. Translatio epistolarum Alexandri ad Aristotelem, cum picturis de monstrosis animalibus Indiæ, Saxonice.
'Translation of Alexander's letter to Aristotle, with pictures of the monstrous animals of India, in Saxon.'
6. Fragmentum de Juditha & Holopherne, Saxonice.
'A fragment of Judith and Holophernes, in Saxon.'
Præmittur annotatio brevis de expugnatione Caleti per R. Edwardum.
'Preceded by a brief annotation of the capture of Calais by King Edward.'

The description of Nero A X (Smith [1696] 1984, 49-50) reads:

Example 2

3. Poema in lingua veteri Anglicana, in quo sub insomnii figmento, ad religionem, pietatem, & vitam probam hortatur Auctor; interspersis quibusdam historicis, & picturis, majoris illustrationis gratia, subinde additis.
'A verse composition in old English language, in which under the guise of a dream, the author exhorts towards religion, piety, and good life; interspersed from time to time with explanations [histories?] and pictures added for greater clarity.'

Smith's description of Vitellius A XV completely overlooks *Beowulf*, which is situated between his items 5, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, and 6, *Judit*. Moreover, his description of Nero A X combines all of the ME poems in the manuscript together into a single item in the description, without any mention of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[8] The likely reason for such omissions was that Smith did not hold particular interest in these works. It is also possible that, as a clergyman, he was more proficient in Latin and Greek than in OE. While the exclusion of *Beowulf* may be perplexing—as Smith does value OE and speaks highly of Cotton's role in saving manuscripts from destruction caused by Henry VIII's dissolution of monasteries (cf. Smith 1696 [1984], 47-51)—it is plausible that he held outright contempt for the works of the Gawain poet. Smith expresses his disdain for some contents of the collection in his introductory essay:

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8 Tite (2003, 131) notes that Harley 6018 seems to refer to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the line *Gesta Arthurii regis et aliorum versu anglico* ['Deeds of King Arthur and others in English verse'].

There is entertainment too for the frivolous with time to spare, ready to waste a few hours reading the dreams of madmen whose wanton minds composed love stories or who babbled about unknown events due to occur in future ages, about the overthrow of empires, changes in royal families, wars, pestilence, floods and the end of the world. [...] There is such abundance of visions and prophecies of this sort in the library that I cannot tell if one is more inclined to burst out laughing or to grieve in pity or to blaze in anger, wondering how lies so dense could be thrust on the credulous populace or how the makers and sellers of trash could sink to such folly and shame. (Smith [1696] 1984, 58)

These omissions serve as a reminder to exercise caution when using Smith as a source. Still, despite its shortcomings, Smith's account remains, by far, the most complete description of the contents of the Cotton collection during the time of Cotton's grandson, which was also the time when new manuscripts ceased to be added to the library.

The problems related to working with the handwritten catalogues are even greater for the reasons discussed above. Harley 6018 is incomplete, bound in the wrong order, and employs a different shelfmark system. The other handwritten catalogues are very short and primarily focus on specific items of interest such as monastic cartularies or documentary texts related to areas near Cotton's Huntingdonshire estates. Lists of manuscripts borrowed out of the Cotton library typically refer only to the item in which the borrower was interested, even though it may have been bound together with other texts.

Scholarship in recent decades has highlighted how much the Cotton library was a working library and an ever-evolving collection. In particular, the research conducted by Tite (1980, 1992, 2003) has greatly contributed to our understanding of how the library's contents changed over time. Tite's extensive work involved the identification of many of the books described in the handwritten catalogues. However, this is inherently challenging for a study like the present one, which focuses on items likely to have been lost. The reason is that identification of a codex described with a different shelfmark relies on the existence of a surviving codex that matches the description. If that particular codex was destroyed in the fire, its identification through this method becomes problematic if not impossible.

Moreover, the evolving nature of the Cotton collection means that the absence of a particular title does not necessarily indicate its destruction in the fire. While Sir Robert actively sought to acquire new books for his library, he was not overly protective of the ones that he already possessed. This is evident in the fact that several books once part of the Cotton collection are now housed in other libraries (Tite 1992). The contents of the Cotton library in 1631, at the time of Sir Robert's death, differed from those in 1731 when the fire occurred. Consequently, if no item in the current Cotton collection matches items in handwritten lists, it does not necessarily mean that it perished in the fire. It is possible that it is now housed in a different collection, such as the present-day Harley or Royal collections.

Considering all these factors, Smith's catalogue remains the most reliable foundation for the current investigation. It provides a description of the collection close to the time when it ceased to function as a working library.

2.4. Post-fire sources

The earliest sources available after the fire are the reports conducted in 1731-1732 and 1756, which will be discussed in more detail in subsection 3.1. The first catalogue after the foundation of the British Library was a subject catalogue by Hooper (1777). This catalogue heavily relied on Smith's publication but has been found to be of limited usefulness when working with the collection. Hooper has a specific heading for *Libri historici saxonici* ['Historical Saxon books'] but not for ME. While he does have categories for different languages in subjects such as romances, it is unclear whether the term *anglice* ['in English'] refers to ME or Early Modern English (see subsection 2.5 below).

The most complete catalogue of Cotton manuscripts was started by Joseph Planta in 1792 and published in 1802. Planta was critical of what he perceived as deficiencies in Smith's catalogue and the overall lack of organisation in the collection, as the manuscripts were not arranged according to subject matter or author (Prescott 1997, 401). As a cataloguer, Planta was intrusive, adding a new set of folio numbers to existing manuscripts and "then proceeded to examine [...] bundles in cases" and arranged "several volumes and parts of volumes of State Papers" (Planta 1802, xiv). Planta was dismissive of manuscripts he was unable to restore, regarding them as "obscure tracts and fragments of little or no importance" (1802, xiv), even though later restorations revealed some of them as important and unique (cf. Prescott 1997, 401). However, he was fairly meticulous in his treatment of documentary texts such as letters and legal documents.

2.5. Middle English prose: definition

The present survey focuses on texts written in *Middle English* and *prose*. For a systematic survey, we need to define these terms, which, fortunately, is fairly straightforward, thanks to the prior resources available on ME verse and OE. The definition of ME used in this study is the same as in *IMEP*, that is, "non-verse texts" copied between 1200 and 1500 (see Rand 2014, vi). The *IMEP* allows for the inclusion of texts that predate 1200 or were copied after 1500 if they are not covered by other standard reference works. The purpose of the *IMEP* is to complement Ker's (1957) *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* and the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (*DIMEV*). Any works already catalogued in these resources are excluded.

Nonetheless, including copies of ME texts made after 1500 remains something of a grey area. In the case of the Cotton volume of the *IMEP*, the decision was made not to include post-1500 copies of ME items due to the extensive

number of transcriptions made by Cotton and other antiquarians. However, these transcriptions are invaluable for the survival of medieval works. It is in this way that the *Battle of Maldon*, the *Runic Poem* and Asser's *Life of King Alfred* have survived to us. Some manuscripts even survive as Early Modern facsimiles, such as those made of Otho A I (see Keynes 1996, figure 6). On the subject of ME, Otho A XVIII contained four poems by Geoffrey Chaucer,[9] which were completely lost to the fire, but survive as transcriptions by William Thomas in 1721, as well as in at least ten other MS witnesses. Whenever Early Modern transcriptions survive for ME prose items, I will note them in my subsequent list.

While defining ME prose may be straightforward, our understanding of OE and especially ME does not fully align with that used by Cotton or Smith.[10] The preferred term for OE was *Saxon* or *Anglo-Saxon* until the twentieth century. Although the core of the seventeenth-century *Saxon* canon fits well with our current understanding of OE canon (see Fletcher 2021, chapter 1), it would also include texts that we now classify as early ME such as the *Ormulum* (Dekker 2018). Moreover, the preferred term for our ME tends to be *old English*. Neither Smith nor Planta employ a consistent system for recording the language of each item. Sometimes they explicitly state the language, using the word *Saxonice* ['in Saxon'] for items copied in OE (example 1), while what we now call ME is referred to as *lingua veteri Anglicana* ['old English language'] (example 2) or *old English*, as evidenced by example 3.

Example 3: Smith's description of Vitellius D XV (Smith [1696] 1984, 94)

4. The life of Gilbert, Founder of the Order of Sempringham: translated by Frere John Capgrave, 1432. in old English.

This, however, is not the only way in which Smith and Planta can indicate the choice of language. Sometimes, they change the language with the entry, describing Latin texts in Latin and English texts in English. Nonetheless, English can also be described in Latin, as in examples 1 and 2. While both Smith and Planta often follow a consistent system for consecutive manuscripts, it is not maintained throughout their entire catalogues. The impression is that they may have followed one practice on a given day but did not adhere to a consistent style sheet for the whole catalogue. Nevertheless, when searching for ME prose texts that were lost to fire, the most reliable source of information is Smith's shift from Latin to English when describing entries or labelling an item as "old English."

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9   Smith ([1696] 1984, 69), Otho A XVIII, 24. A Ballade made Geffrey Chaucer upon his death-bed, lying in his anguish, 25. Ballade ryall, made by Chaucer, 26. Chaucer's ballade to his purse, 27. Cantus Troili, 28. Pictura Galfridi Chauceri. *DIMEV* numbers 1326-16; 4990-8; 5249-7 and 6044-9.

10   I am grateful to Dr Rachel Fletcher for her comments on the definitions of Old and Middle English in Cotton's time.

3. FIRE DAMAGE

3.1. The extent of the fire damage

To determine the number of Cotton manuscripts that were lost in the fire, it is helpful to start with the official reports from the eighteenth century. The first and most detailed report was conducted by a parliament committee immediately after the fire in October 1731 and submitted in January 1732, three months later (Prescott 1997, 391). According to the report, "the Cotton library contained before the fire 958 manuscript volumes, of which 114 were 'lost, burnt or intirely spoiled' and another 98 so damaged as to be defective" (Prescott 1997, 391). While these numbers are very precise, they do not reflect the present state of the collection. The majority of the 114 codices reported as completely lost have since been successfully restored and are available for consultation, even if some of their contents may have been lost due to damage (1997, 391). What is more, there are manuscripts that were damaged in the fire, but are not listed in the report. To use the most famous fire victim as an example, the '*Beowulf* manuscript,' Cotton Vitellius A XV, is not among the ninety-eight listed as defective.

Subsequent reports were carried out in 1756, when the collection was assessed by officials from the British Museum during its founding, using Smith's catalogue as the basis of comparison (Prescott 1997, 397). These reports stated that the manuscripts in ten of the presses (Julius, Augustus, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Cleopatra, Faustina and the Appendix) had "suffered nothing by the fire" and were "found to agree with Mr Smith's catalogue" (Prescott 1997, 397). They also reported the inability to locate some of the items described in the previous report and the possibility that some manuscripts reported as damaged could still be restored. On the other hand, they reported that the following five shelfmarks had suffered the most damage: Tiberius, Caligula, Galba, Otho and Vitellius. This list corresponds to the most heavily damaged ME manuscripts listed in subsections 3.2 and 3.3. However, it also has to be noted that the fire damage was not concentrated evenly within these shelfmarks.

Even among the badly burned shelfmarks, there are unaffected codices. For instance, Vitellius A XVI remains largely intact, with no visible fire damage affecting the legibility of its pages, despite being located right next to the Nowell Codex, Vitellius A XV, which contains *Beowulf*. In fact, the damage appears somewhat random. One possible reason for this is that the manuscripts were not in perfect order, as they had been moved twice in the decades between the death of Sir John Cotton in 1702 and the Ashburnham House fire in 1731.

Finally, it should be noted that medieval manuscripts often have missing leaves or may have suffered other types of damage. As this study focuses on the effects of fire damage, other types of damage are not included. In subsections 3.2 and 3.3, the manuscripts are listed in the traditional order, which follows a chronological arrangement for the twelve emperors, followed by the two imperial ladies, Cleopatra and Faustina, as well as the Appendix and Fragments. When identifying works surviving in multiple copies, I will make reference to standard reference works

such as the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (*DIMEV*), the *Index of Printed Middle Prose* (*IPMEP*) and *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500* (*Manual*). I will refer to the *IPMEP* citing text number and to the *Manual* citing volume, page and text numbers. For texts which are included in the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (*LALME*) (McIntosh, Samuels and Benskin 1986), I will give the linguistic profile (LP) numbers.

3.2. Badly damaged or lost Middle English prose texts

After successful restorations, the current count of manuscripts considered completely lost in the library fire is actually as low as thirteen (cf. Prescott 1997, 391; Dunning, Hudson and Duffy 2018, 8).[11] Most manuscripts that were once considered lost have been restored, although many of them now only consist of a few charred leaves on separate paper mounts. If a text survives only in a few badly damaged fragments or was completely lost despite other sections of the manuscript surviving, it will also be included in this section.

Caligula D IV. The manuscript contains primary documents related to dealings between England and France from the reign of Henry IV. Unfortunately, it was badly damaged in the fire and hardly any of the items are legible. Planta (1802, 153) notes: "Fragments of divers papers relating to the affairs of the English dominions in France; chiefly in French and of the time of Henry IV. K. of England. This MS consisted originally of 150 leaves, of which only 70 are now left, and there so much burnt and defaced as hardly to be of any use." The majority of the contents are not in English, but fragments of English letters survive on ff. 94-95, addressed to the Chancellor and Treasurer of England in 1405, and f. 111, dated to 17 January 1407. A bilingual letter fragment with the address terms in English and the main text in French is on f. 29. It was written on the 24th day, but the month and year are too damaged to read.

Caligula D V is a collection of primary sources on Henry V's campaigns in France. Like the previous MS, this one is also badly damaged. Fortunately, Robert Sanderson, Clerk of the Rolls (d. 1741), made a number of transcriptions of these primary documents before the fire. These include p. 141, "Extract from Cotton MS Caligula D. v., viz. letter of R – Priour to [Robert Frye] that the meeting of the Kings (see art. 18 i) is postponed, that the ambassadors going to Paris were attacked by the Dauphin's men, etc.; Vernon, 11 May [1419]. Original now lost. f. 94" (*British*

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[11] According to the British Library website, sixteen manuscripts were lost in the fire (or a later one in the BL book bindery in 1865, on which see Prescott 1997): Galba A. I, Galba A. II, Galba A. III, Galba A. VIII, Otho A. XV, Otho A. XVI, Otho A. XVII, Otho B. I, Otho B. VIII, the former Otho B. XIV, Otho B. XV, Otho C. VI, Otho E. II, Otho E. V, Vitellius D. XIV and Vitellius F. XIV. https://hviewer.bl.uk/IamsHViewer/ Default.aspx?mdark=ark:/81055/vdc_100000000035.0x0000b4.

Library Catalogue of Additions, 1911-1915, published by the Trustees of the British Museum, Oxford: Oxford University Press [1925] 1969).

Otho B XIII. The manuscript was badly damaged in the fire with large sections missing. It once contained a history of Crowland Abbey. Parts of the manuscript were edited and printed by W. Fulman in *Rerum Anglicarum scriptorum veterum*, vol. I (Oxford, 1684). The text is mainly in Latin, but pp. 522-524 contain a now-lost exchange between the Abbot of Crowland and Lord Dacre in ME (see *LALME* I, 106; Tite 2003, 152).

Vitellius A I. Like many manuscripts in the Vitellius shelf mark, this codex has been badly damaged in the library fire. Planta (1802, 378) describes it as *male habitus* ['in bad condition']. Ff. 1-27 contain John Somer's *Kalendarium* (*Manual* 10:3769 [62]). The work is badly damaged but survives in thirty-three complete and nine partial copies (see Mooney 1998, 48-49). It is followed (ff. 27r-30v) by a short *London Chronicle* (*IPMEP*, 365; *Manual*, 8:2845) from 1326 to 1462, with the names of mayors and sheriffs of London and short annalistic entries. These too received significant fire damage.

Vitellius D XII. Some fragments now remain of this manuscript. English ones include a single-leaf prose fragment of the *Siege of Rhodes* (f. 43), which contains the final page of a novel by Gulielmus Caorsin ([1482] 1970), translated into English by John Kay. Textually, the fragment is close but not identical, suggesting that it is the same version, but not copied from the printed edition. The fragments also include two verse ones, *The Expedition of Henry V into France* (*DIMEV*, 1591-1592) and *The Gossips' Meeting* (*DIMEV*, 3795), edited by Robbins (1963), which is separated from Titus A XXVI. However, the manuscript must have contained several more texts. Smith switches from Latin to English for items 7-12 in his catalogue and specifies that item 7 is in "Old English," which are both surefire signs of ME. Smith's description reads:

> 7. The rule of S. Augustin, in old English.
> 8. Three letters of a devout man to a Nun.
> 9. Directions and rules for the management of private devotion in the course of life, and in the use of the offices of religion.
> 10. The siege of Rhodes, written by John Kay, and dedicated to King Edward IV.
> 11. The siege of Harflet and battle of Agencourt by King Henry v. in old English verse.
> 12. The tale of the little boy and the friar in old English verse. (Smith [1696] 1984, 93)

Vitellius D XV is a badly damaged manuscript, which consists of burned fragments that were disordered in the binding process, ff. 29r-35v (for the correct order, see Munro 1910, xi). Smith lists three items in it, the first three of which are in Latin. The final one contains John Capgrave's *Life of Saint Gilbert* (*IPMEP*, 771), a saint's life which Capgrave translated from Latin for the nuns of Sempringham Prior (see Munro 1910, ix). Fortunately, it is not the only surviving copy of the work, as the full text survives in Add. MS 36704, which is Capgrave's holograph.

Fragments XXII contains twelve leaves, which are faded and burned around the edges. The contents are related to the English cloth trade.

Fragments XXXII consists of fragments stored in boxes, which are in such a fragile condition that they are normally not handed out to readers.[12]

Fragments XXXII, Box 6 contains fragments of an unidentified ME work.

Fragments XXXII, Box 8 contains fragments of Tiberius E VII, which included the Northern Homilies, a paraphrase of Richard Rolle's *Form of Living*, William Nassington's *Speculum vitae* and a ghost story called *The Gast of Gy.*

3.3. Partially damaged ME prose texts

In addition to manuscripts in which a significant amount of text was lost, there are ones in which the damage was much more minor, but still leading to the loss of some text. They are listed here.

Tiberius A X. The manuscript has been badly damaged by fire. It is now mounted on paper due to its nineteenth-century restauration. Planta (1802, 34) notes that the MS is too badly damaged to describe. Smith ([1696] 1984, 20-21) lists twenty-six documentary texts, most of which are in Latin, but item 17 is in English: "Proclamation of King Henry the sixth at Dunstaple in the 37. year of his reign, anno 1459. that no man should be adherent to any Lord, or go with him, except he be the said Lord's menial man in houshold." The ME text is fortunately mostly legible, despite having a few gaps due to fire damage.

Tiberius B VI is the remnants of a medieval codex, containing copies of various documentary texts relating to the deeds of Henry V in France in 1417-1420. The manuscript is marked as *desideratur* 'missing' by Planta (1802, 36), but its contents are described in detail by Smith ([1696] 1984, 23-24), who lists twenty-five items. Most of them are in Latin but item 11, ff. 17v-19v, is in English, containing declarations made by the royal ambassadors of Henry V, relating to various matters. The manuscript received significant fire damage resulting in the loss of text, especially around the side margins. The fire also turned the parchment partly transparent, which makes the text difficult to read as the text on both sides shows through.

Tiberius B XII. This manuscript is described by both Planta (1802, 37) and Smith ([1696] 1984, 24). Planta notes that the MS is *incendio nimium corruptus* ['excessively damaged by fire'] and copies his description straight from Smith. The manuscript is a fifteenth-century compilation of documents "made by Thomas Beckington, bishop of Bath and Wells, to fortify the English claim to the French crown" (Tite 2003, 108). It is a finely decorated volume with decorations supplied by the so-called Shaded Initials Master, and may have been presented as a gift to Henry VI by Beckington (Scott 2006, 105). Most of its contents are not in English,

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[12] I am fortunate to have had access to digitised images of these fragments, thanks to the generosity and help of Julian Harrison and Calum Cockburn.

but out of the ones that are, the English translation of the treaty of Troyes, between Henry V and Charles VI in 1420, ff. 107v-111r, is readable. However, ff. 214v-218v and ff. 232v-234r contain two English documents that are so badly damaged that they are barely legible.

Tiberius C VII. This manuscript received some fire damage, as noted by Planta (1802, 38): *incendio nimium corrugatus* ['excessively shrivelled by fire']. It contains *Henry Knighton's Chronicle*, edited by J. R. Lumby, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnitthon, Monachi Leycestrensis*, RS 92 (London, 1889-1895). The chronicle is in Latin, but contains occasional speeches in English, including the speeches of the rebel leaders Jakke Mylner, Jakke Carter and Jakke Trewman, and the letter of John Ball in 1381, f. 174r-v, as well as confessions by the Lollards John Wycliffe, f. 179r-v, ff. 180v-181r, Nicholas Hereford, ff. 183v-184r, and John Aston, f. 184r-v. The damage to the English sections is minimal.

Tiberius C IX. This manuscript is burned around the margins, causing the loss of some lines particularly at the tops of leaves. The first item in the manuscript is the Latin *Historia vitae et regni Ricardi Secundi*, ff. 1r-44v. According to Dunphy (2010, 806), this is the second earliest surviving copy of the work and dates to 1413. While the main text is in Latin, it includes three speeches given by Lancastrians, which are copied in English. These are Henry IV's claim to the throne (*IPMEP*, 369), f. 43rb; a speech by Henry IV on his accession (*IPMEP*, 607), f. 43vb; and an announcement of Richard II's deposition (*IPMEP*, 606), ff. 44rb-vb. All of these items suffered minor damage, leading to the loss of a few words close to the margins.

Tiberius D VII. The manuscript, which is now bound in two parts, was burned somewhat badly, but has been restored and mounted on paper leaves, making cuts to pages, which is a sign of early restoration techniques by Forshall (cf. Prescott 1997, 406). It contains an important early witness of John of Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon* (*IPMEP*, 605; *Manual*, 8:2866 [21]), dating to the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, copied in a dialect close to Berkeley, where Trevisa was vicar (*LALME*, LP 7051; cf. Waldron 2004, xi-lix; Liira 2020, 62-63). While some words have been lost to fire damage, the text itself survives as thirteen other ME copies and three printed editions. Chapter VI of the text was edited from the present MS by Waldron (2004).

Tiberius E VIII. This paper manuscript was badly burned, leading to the loss of a significant amount of text. The document seems to have been folded when it caught fire and now there is a big hole in the bottom and middle. The majority of its contents are Early Modern, but ff. 214v-215r contain articles of agreement between Henry VI and Richard Duke of York concerning the title to the crown; a significant portion of text is now missing.

Galba B II is a paper manuscript, which was damaged in the fire. Its pages are now burned around the edges with damage to the text at the left, right and top. The manuscript contains primary documents related to diplomatic matters between Henry VII and France, the Holy Roman Empire and Burgundy. The majority of the documents are dated after 1500, but two are from 1499. Ff. 48r-53v, containing a report from Henry VII's commissioners, is dated to March-April 1499. Ff. 107r-109v

contain instructions from Henry VII about Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, dated to September 1499.

Vitellius A X is a composite manuscript, containing Wace's Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* and other mainly Latin and French historical texts. It received minor damage around the margins. The final part of the manuscript, ff. 163r-205v, consists of statutes of the Lichfield Cathedral. These are mainly in Latin but include three ME documentary texts. They are a ruling by Edward IV dating to 1470-1471, f. 167; a petition to confirm grants to Lichfield Cathedral, addressed to Henry VI, ff. 197v-198r; and a copy of a letter by Henry VII to the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral, dated to 13 September 1485, f. 205r-v. All are nearly intact, with fire damage mainly causing the loss of the top line of the second ME text.

Vitellius E X. This is a paper manuscript, which has been burned around the edges, especially the top and centre. It contains three sermon drafts by Bishop John Russell (ff. 170r-176v, ff. 177r-179v, ff. 180v-183r, ff. 184r-185v) and the *Treatise of Hope*, a ME translation of Alain Chartier's *Le traité de l'esperance* (1428). All of these are readable, despite the loss of some text.

Vitellius F IX, ff. 1r-70v, contains a copy of the *London Chronicle* from 1189 to 1439 (*IPMEP*, 365; for a description of this copy see McLaren 2002, 100-103). The manuscript is burned around the top, left and right margins, leading to loss of text, but the majority remains readable.

Vitellius F XII contains another copy of the *London Chronicle* from Richard I (1189) to Henry VI (1439), as well as a narrative of the foundation of the Franciscan convent of Newgate in London. The manuscript is also known as the *Chronicle of the Greyfriars*, since it was found and likely copied in the monastery of Greyfriars (McLaren 2002, 117; this copy is not listed in *IPMEP*, 365). The manuscript received damage to the edges, leading to loss of some text.

Vitellius F XVI contains a register of the Hospital of St Augustine Papey in London. It is almost entirely in Latin, but f. 119 contains a memorandum dated to the sixth year of Edward IV concerning an agreement between the mayor and aldermen of London. Even though the manuscript has lost the upper halves of pages due to fire damage, the ME text is in the lower half of f. 119 and mostly intact.

Appendix XXXIX. The manuscript contains six partly damaged texts, two of which are copies of well-known ME works. Ff. 1r-22v contain an acephalous and atelous copy of *The Three Kings of Cologne* (*IPMEP*, 290; *Manual*, 2:630 [277]; see Horstmann 1886 and Schaer 2000 for editions). The text corresponds with pp. 3, l. 9 to 121, l. 33 in Horstmann. Ff. 23r-28v contain a fragment of the prose *Brut* (*IPMEP*, 374; *Manual*, 8:2818 [10]; see Matheson 1998), which corresponds to pp. 129, l. 8 to 140, l. 15 in Brie (1906/1908).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The list of lost and damaged texts provides valuable insights into the strengths and focal points of the collection as a whole, at least with respect to the ME prose preserved in it. Cotton was a politician as well as an antiquarian, who used his

collection not only for the historically oriented scholarship that he presented at the Society of Antiquaries, but also as a source for finding historical precedents, which he used for making political arguments (see Sharpe 1997, 24-27). Cotton's aim, in the words of Smith ([1696] 1984, 30) was:

> to gain a thorough understanding of the whole shape of government in England traced in all its aspects and tasks from its earliest origin through successive centuries and supported by evidence collected by his powerful intelligence [...]

Cotton's library was and is an excellent source for someone interested in English history, also in relation to the affairs of neighbouring countries like France, and the monastic history of England. As the library was not organised based on subject matter (see Sharpe [1979] 2002, chapter 2), although the fire disproportionately damaged certain shelfmarks, the resulting list of lost and damaged texts presents a cross-section of the materials that Cotton accumulated.

Damaged and lost ME prose texts include several volumes of state papers and other documentary texts in Tiberius B XII, Tiberius E VIII, Caligula D IV, Caligula D V, Fragments XXII, Tiberius A X, Tiberius B VI, Tiberius C VIII, Galba B II and Vitellius A X. Historical chronicles such as *Henry Knighton's Chronicle* in Tiberius C VII, the *Polychronicon* in Tiberius D VII and two copies of the *London Chronicle* in Vitellius F IX and Vitellius F XII were also impacted.

Another major group which is well-represented among damaged ME texts consists of monastic registers, cartularies and histories, which were among the lost or damaged texts in Otho B XIII and Vitellius F XVI. Similarly, saints' lives such as Capgrave's *Life of St Gilbert* (Vitellius D XV), as well as sermons and other religious treatises (Vitellius E X) were affected. The effects of the fire on this group reflects who collected manuscripts from dissolved monasteries, which seem to have circulated in the antiquarian market of Cotton's days and which he was skilful in acquiring.

Even though some of the most famous works in the Cotton collection are literary, these kinds of texts are in the minority. This is also reflected in the list of damaged ME prose works: *The Siege of Rhodes* in Vitellius D XII and *The Three Kings of Cologne* in Appendix XXXIX. Similarly, scientific treatises, represented by John Somer's *Kalendar* in Vitellius A I, were not central to Cotton's interests, unlike another founding collection of the BL, the one assembled by Sir Hans Sloane. The contents of the Cotton library are overwhelmingly historical, which is exactly where Cotton's main interests lay.

The emphasis on historical texts in Cotton's library has implications, especially when it comes to the survival of documentary texts. Some of the letters and other documents may have been unique, making their loss greater than that of well-known ME texts that survive in several copies. On the other hand, scribes produced several copies of important documents, especially state papers, which increased the chances of their survival. As Cotton had good access to the archives in Westminster, many of the documents in the Cotton library fell into this category. Still, there are likely to be items that do not survive in several copies such as Smith's now lost item 8 in Vitellius D XII, "Three letters of a devout man to a nun."

It is also worth noting that many contemporary users of the library, such as Cotton's fellow antiquarians, as well as both Smith and Planta, seem to have shared Cotton's historical interests. As a result, these items received more detailed descriptions. We know what Smith considered important from the six categories that he lists in his introductory essay (Smith [1696] 1984, 47-56):

1. Manuscripts written in the Anglo-Saxon tongue,
2. cartularies of monasteries,
3. lives and passions of saints and martyrs,
4. genealogical tables,
5. histories, annals, and chronicles and
6. original records of the kingdom.

He does acknowledge that these six categories do not cover everything, but as is clear from the quote in subsection 2.2, he does not think much of "entertainment [...] for the frivolous" such as "love stories" or "visions and prophecies" ([1696] 1984, 58), a bias which may have caused him to overlook items such as *Beowulf* or the work of the Gawain poet.

In the introduction to the original *Index of Middle English Verse*, Brown and Robbins (1943) make the following hopeful contention: "At most, we can be sure that no major work has perished, for any work of excellence would have been preserved in at least one or two MSS" (1943, xii). Nevertheless, Smith's exclusion of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from his catalogue tells us a different story. If these works had completely perished in the Cotton fire, we would have no knowledge of their existence and importance. Consequently, it is not impossible that something else could have perished too.

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