

MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTS

The most common type of medieval document is called a '**charter**'. A charter is a record of something happening and acts as written proof of this event. Most often they record a piece of land being given as a gift to someone, but they can also record someone giving money to a church or the king ordering someone to do something.

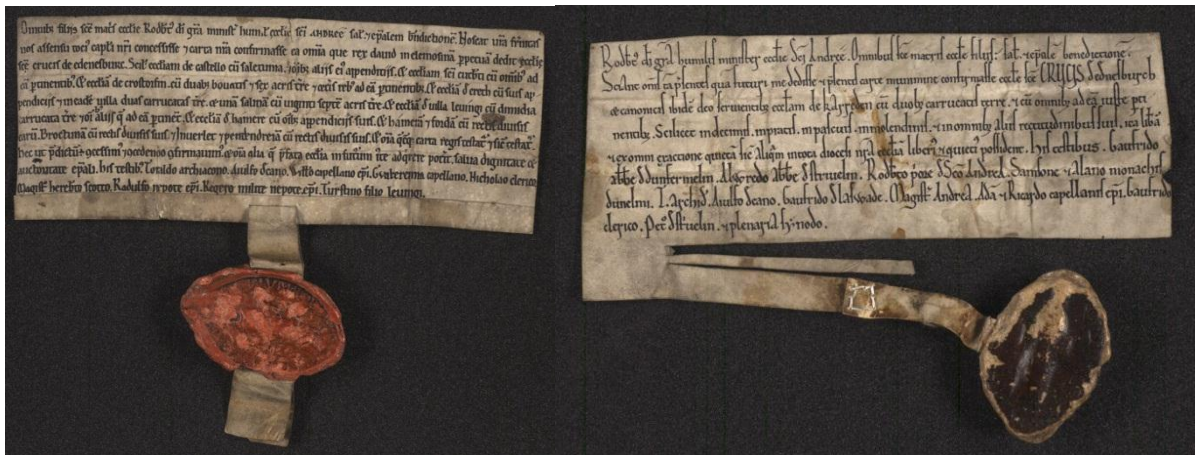
Charters are written quite like letters. They begin with a person addressing another person (or group of people). A king might address a bishop or a sheriff; or he might address everyone in his kingdom. But unlike most letters, charters were meant to be seen by everyone, so that in general people knew what was going on.

The page of the charter is usually known as the **manuscript**. Manuscript literally means 'written by hand'. Manuscripts were made of animal skin, called **parchment** or **vellum**, which took a long time to prepare for writing on. A trained **scribe** (a professional writer) then had to write the text, which was usually in Latin, using a feather **quill** and **ink**. Only a few people knew how to read and write in the medieval period.

Once the charter had been written, various people would act as **witnesses** to it so that they could prove the charter was genuine if anyone tried to challenge it later on. The scribe would write the names of the witnesses at the bottom of the document. Finally, the wax **seal** of the person giving the charter was attached to the bottom. Seals were made of flat, round pieces of wax, stamped with a unique design on each side which could not be copied by anyone else. Because manuscripts were so expensive to make – you had to pay for the parchment, the scribe, the ink, the seal and for someone to deliver the finished charter – it was mainly rich people who had charters written.

People usually kept the charters they received in wooden boxes used to store documents and valuable objects. It was important to keep these important documents and seals safe so that they could be used in the future as proof that you owned your land. Churches looked after their documents very well. So, although many buildings and documents have been destroyed over the centuries, most of the charters and other manuscripts that survive from the medieval period are those which were kept in churches. In medieval Scotland these were mainly monasteries such as Melrose Abbey, Dunfermline Abbey, Arbroath Abbey, Paisley Abbey, Holyrood Abbey, Coldingham Priory and St Andrews Cathedral Priory.

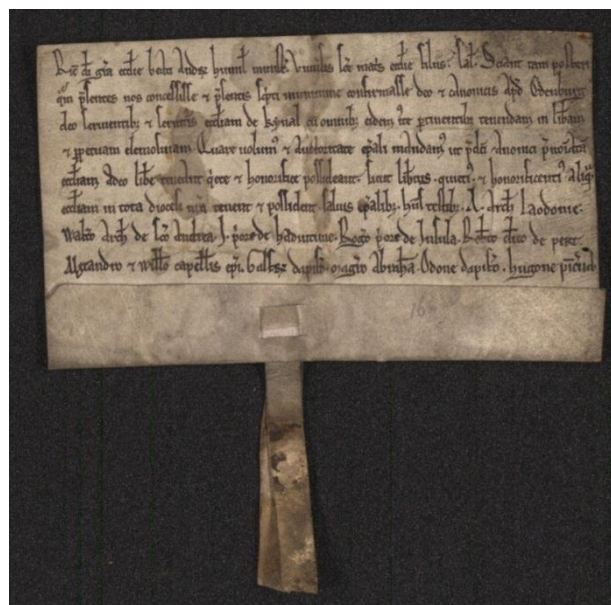
Here are two examples of what a **charter** normally looked like.



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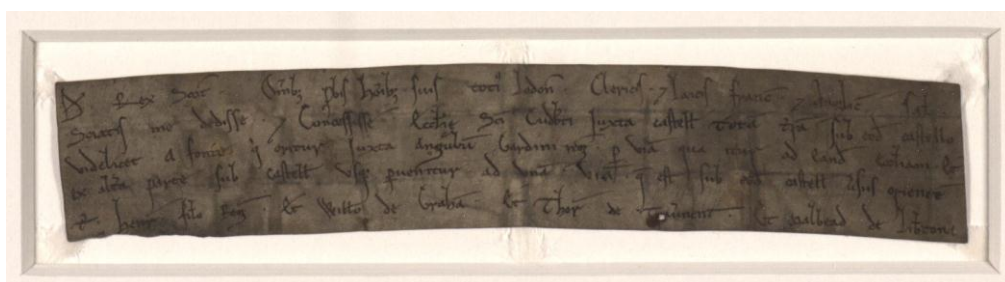
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Because the **seals** were quite heavy, they sometimes dropped off the manuscript. In this charter, the tag at the bottom of the manuscript still shows where the seals would have been attached.



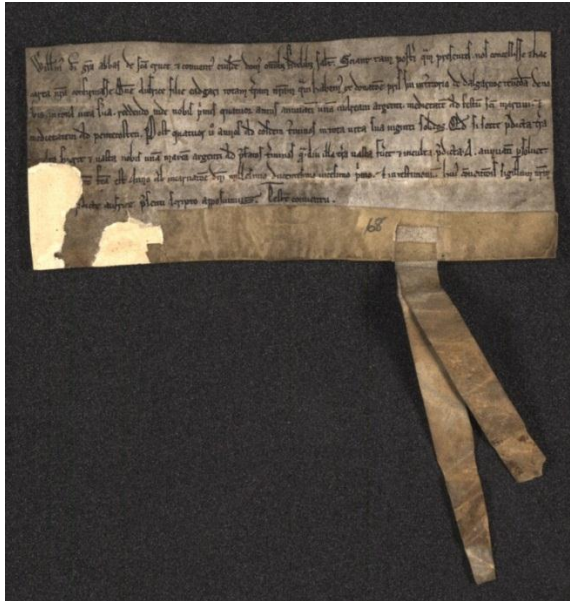
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Sometimes charters were **short letters** from the king instructing people to do things for him.

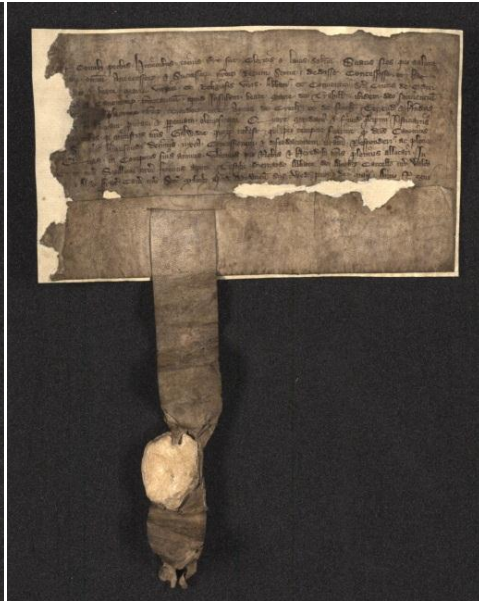


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Sometimes the charter has been so **ripped**, parts of it are impossible to read. The first example here is one of William the Lion (king of Scots 1165–1214). The second example has been so ripped we cannot see who the first name is in the text. However, because of the other people who appear in the text, we can tell that the first person was Robert the Bruce (king of Scots 1306–1328).

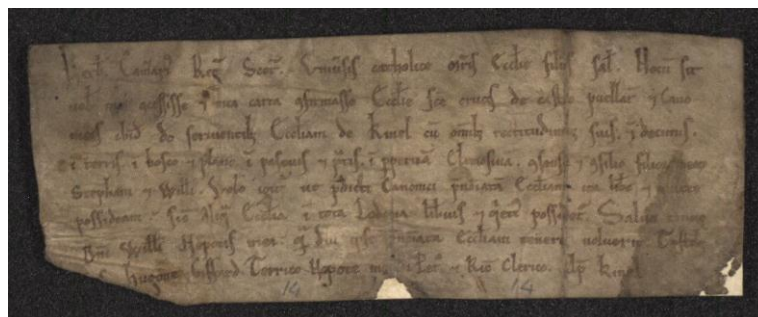


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Charters could also be damaged by **water** leaking into the archive, making the ink fade or marking the parchment.



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When two people made an **agreement** or a pact, they had a clever way of preventing forgeries. A scribe would write out the same text of the agreement twice, at two ends of the parchment. Along the middle, between the two texts, he would write a word in big letters. Then he would cut a zigzag-line across the middle, right through the word, and give each person a copy of the charter to keep. Now only these two pieces of parchment could fit together, otherwise the word and the zig-zags wouldn't line-up!

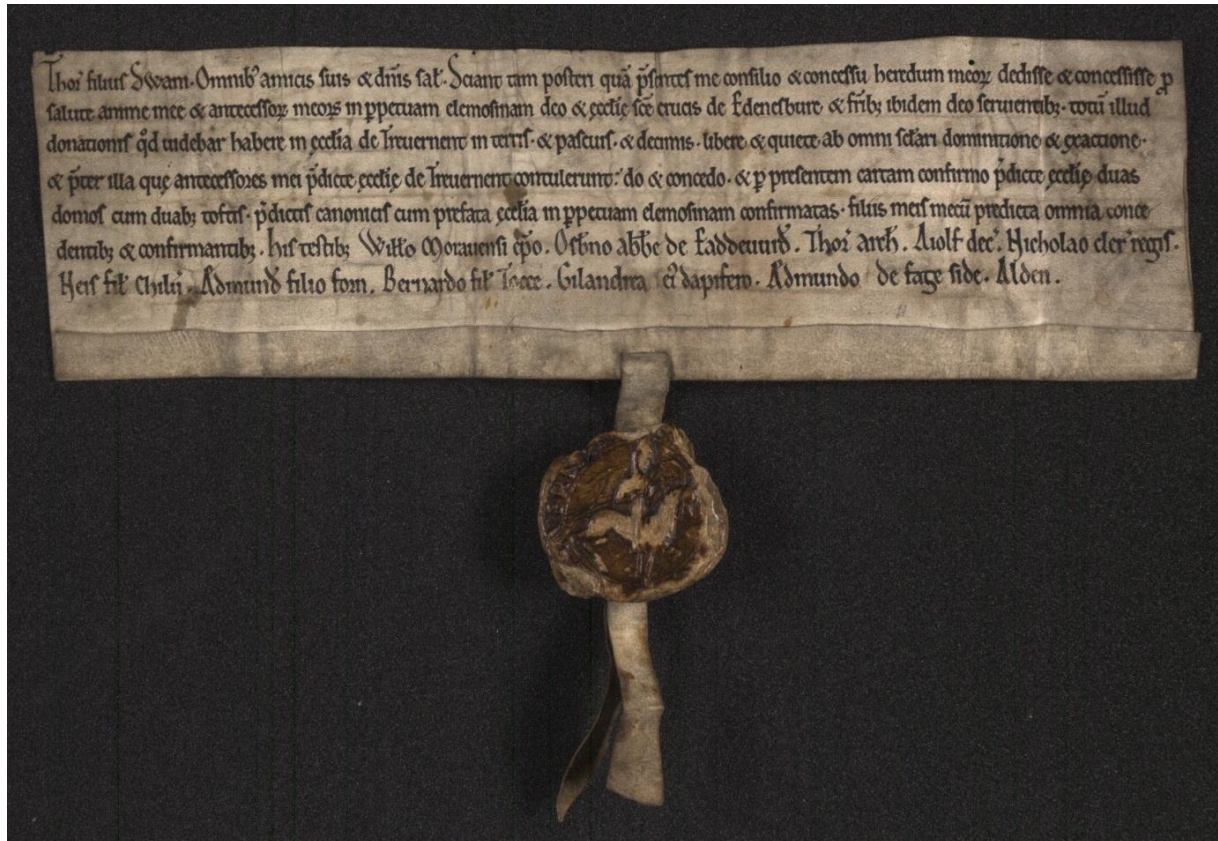
These kinds of documents were called **indentures** because the zigzag line looked a bit like teeth (think of false teeth, which are sometimes called 'dentures').

Below is an example of an indenture. There are lots of tags of parchment at the bottom where the different parties would have attached their **wax seal** to show that they had agreed. Unfortunately the seals have fallen off.



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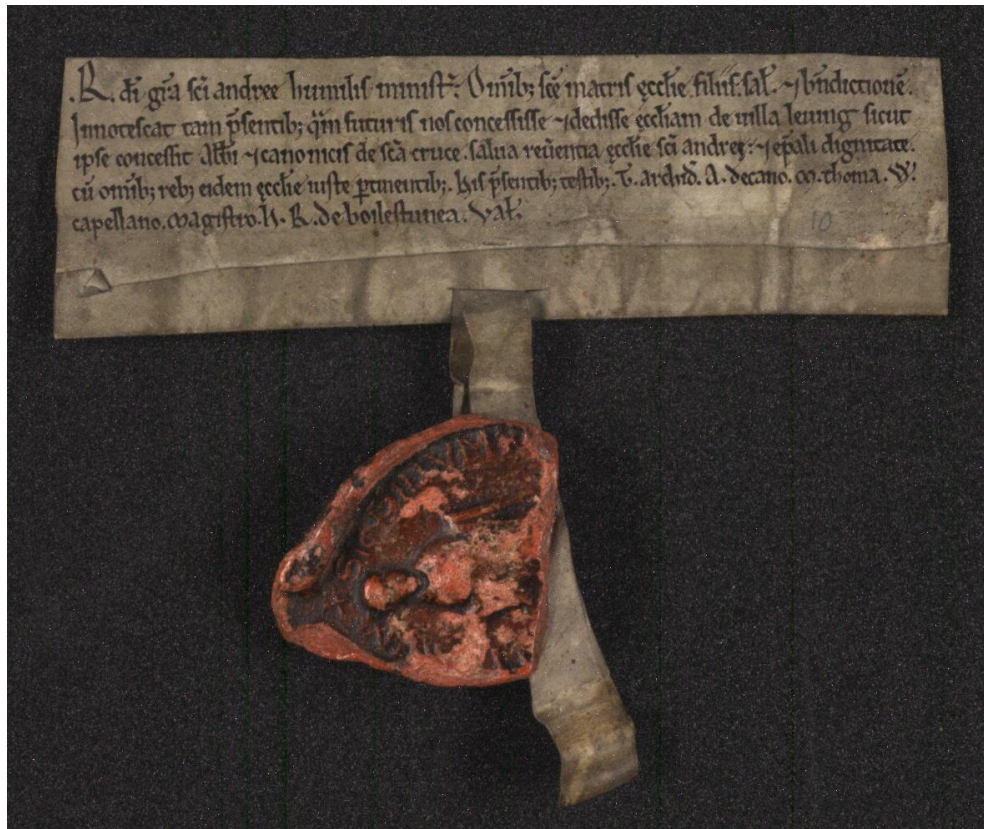
Here is an example where the scribe has written the text, but then added the names of the people who **witnessed** the event later on. You can tell this happened because the writing of the names looks different to the rest: the letters are bigger and more spaced-out on the parchment. The names begin from the 'W' near the middle of the second-last line.



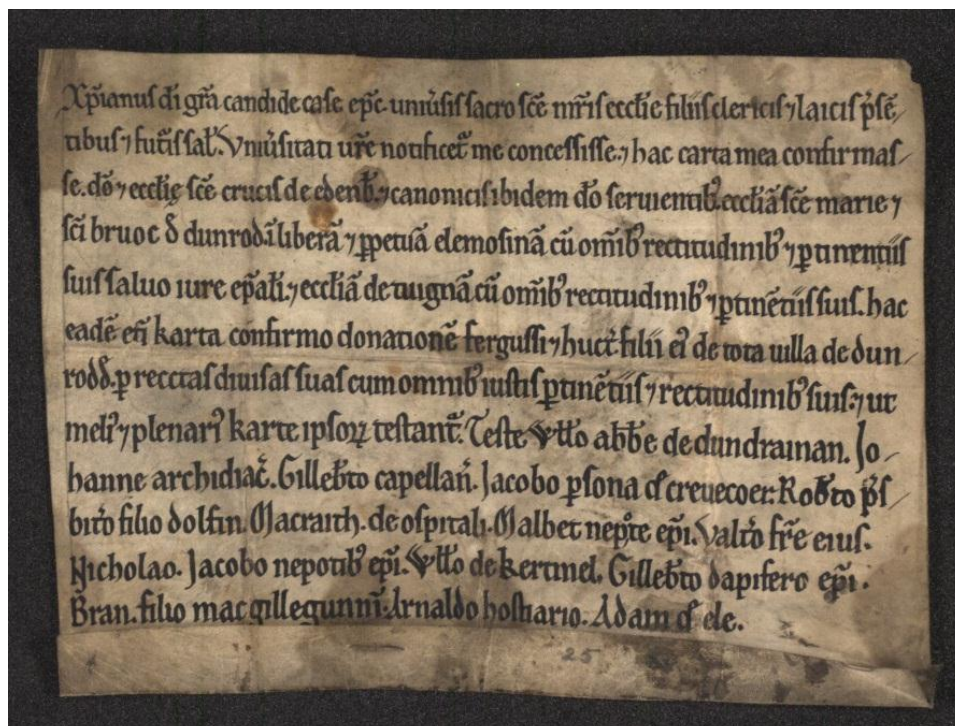
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Here are some more examples of charters.

The **handwriting** looks different in each: the style of the scribe's handwriting depended on how formal or informal the document was supposed to be, how fast the scribe had to write, the scribe's training, and how much he was getting paid to do the job!



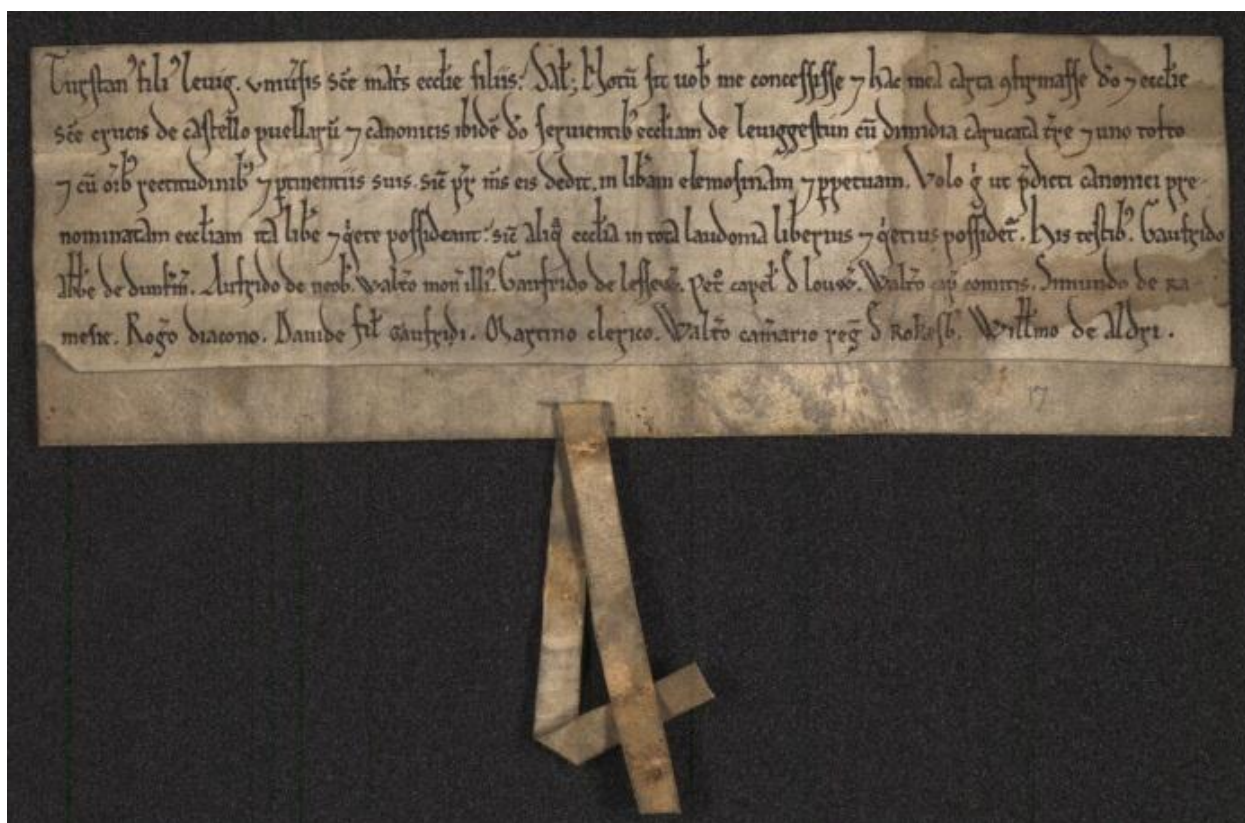
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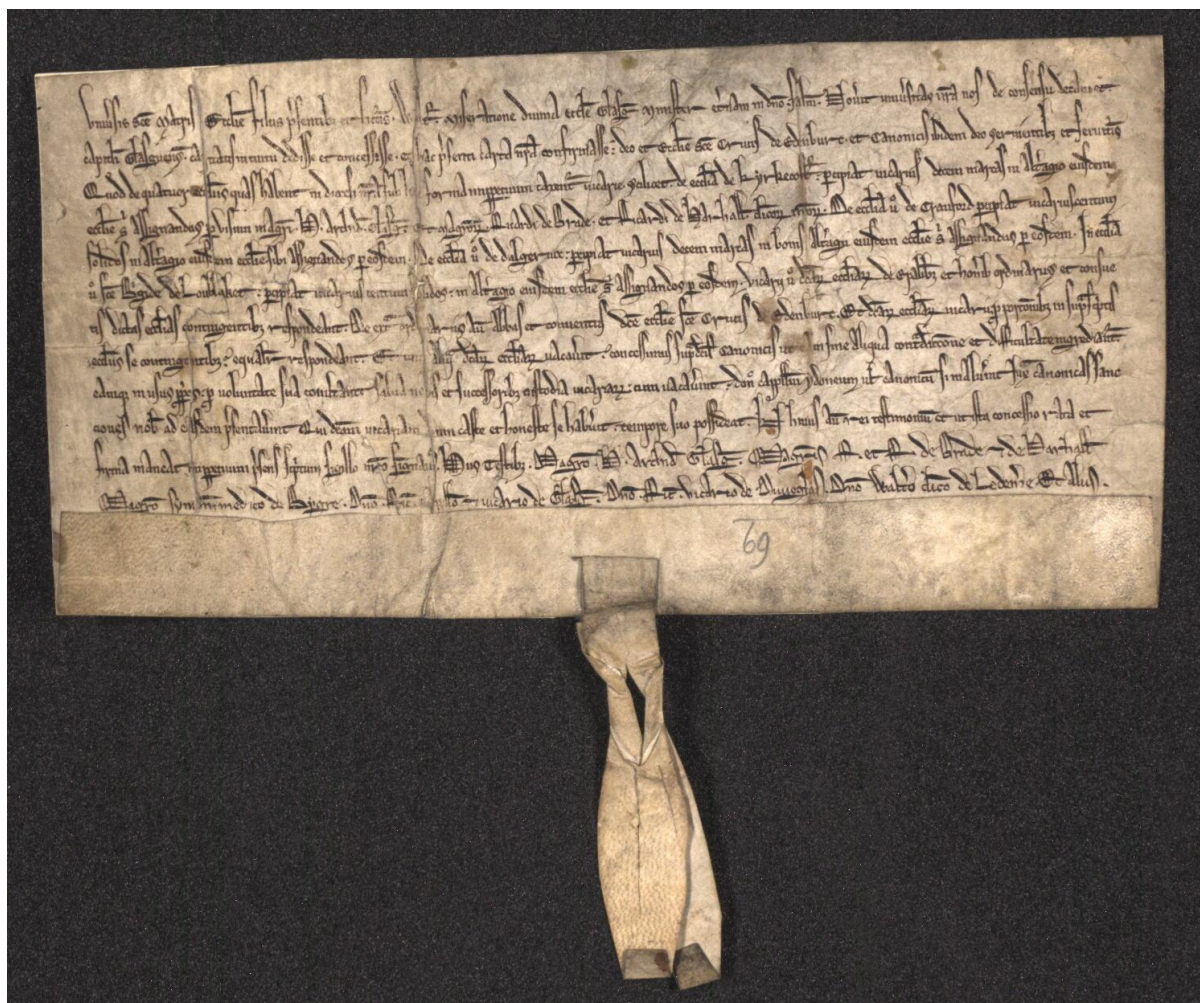
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De gra R^{ex} Scot. Ep^{is}. Abb^{atibz}. Comitibz. Bar^{onibz}. Just. Succo^{gn}
 7 Omibz fidelibz suis. Sal. Sciatis ea postea q^{ue} presentes me dedisse 7 concessisse
 imperpetuam elemosinam deo 7 ecc^{lesie} sue gr^{ati}is 7 deneb^{unt} 7 Canonici deo ibi serm^{on}ibz
 7 salute antecessor^{um} 7 successor^{um} meor^{um} ecc^{lesiam} 7 gra^{ti}ant^{ur} cu^m omibz iuste ad eam
 p^{er}tenentibz sic Valerann^{us} Capell^{an} unq^{ue} mel^{ius} ea h^{ab}uit 7 tenuit. Salua tenura
 ipsi Valeranni Capellani q^{uod}diu in conuersatione seculari manserit. Vale mag^{is}
 ut p^{re}dicti canonici rect^{am} illa^m imperpetuam t^{em}p^{or}ibz post Valeranni d^{ic}cessu ita libe
 7 q^{uod}q^{ue} ob^{er}u^{er}ent sic alias suas h^{ab}uit 7 tenent elemosinas 7 possessiones. Test^{is}
 Ada Comissa matre mea. Hug^o de Horeult. Gal^{ter}o Cancell^o. Gal^{ter}o filio alani
 Nicolao clerico ipso Valeranno p^{re}sent^{is} 7 postulante ap^{ud} Edene^m 7 B^{er} 7
 18

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De gra R^{ex} Scot^{ie} Omibz p^{ri}us hoibz totius terre sue salute. Scilicet Clerici 7 laici me Can^{on}ice
 7 hoc p^{re}sent^{is} Carta^m firmasse do^{ce} recte sue cor^{am} de edene^m 7 Canonici ibide^m do^{ce} serm^{on}ibz donationem
 illam q^{uod} a Cartissa mat^{ris} meae et fec^{it} de uno t^{er}ra^m iⁿ kar^o 7 de redditu^m d^{ic}unt mag^{is} 7 firma^m q^{uod} nulle o^{mn}i^um
 p^{er}petuo 7 de uno t^{er}ra^m iⁿ kar^o. Cu^m decima ann^u l^{it}eraz 7 placid^{or} 7 p^{er}uenit^{ur} de hadu^m 7 seye. Bened^{ict} 7 habend^{um}
 7 h^{ab}it^{ur} p^{er}petuam elemosinam sic carta a Cartisse mat^{ris} mee test^{is} 7. Eng^o Cancell^o. Gal^{ter}o filio alani. Rob^{ert}
 Auen^{us} ap^{ud} Edene^m 7 B^{er} 7
 20

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