Quintilian observed that “it is often easier to achieve more than to achieve the same; producing an exact replica is very difficult.”¹ Medieval scribes and, later, scholars of the French Ancien Regime have left us a legacy of texts known as copies which amply illustrate Quintilian’s observation. The work of medieval copyists may perhaps be seen as modulating something already written, as working with, and between, the lines of antecedent texts which, although considered by us as originals, were, through the treatment they received when copied, evidently capable of becoming something more, or something less. It is as if there were no original documents but only texts, tacitly unfinished, never fully complete, ever available for a later hand to re-present their contents yet again. Such a strategy for reproduction may have been based upon a belief that all documentary texts were equally functional, whatever the material format or the specific textual version in which they appeared. Because strict duplication seems to have been eschewed in producing the various versions of a single deed, it maybe that the so-called archetype was never an original document in our modern sense, but truly an “act” by which actions, transactions, or judgments were accomplished. In that sense, every surviving document reporting such events may best be understood as a copy.

This formulation is not, of course, the standard doctrine espoused by modern diplomatists who, since Mabillon (d. 1707), have tended, more or less systematically, to assume the existence of an original document perceived as unique, of an Ur-text from which later versions necessarily had to originate, and against whose authenticity the adequateness of any other copy may and need be tested.² The normative


² Dom Jean Mabillon’s methodology is expounded in his De re diplomatica Libri VI (Paris, 1681). For analyses of Mabillon’s epistemological contributions to the discipline of history and of his role in the creation of the so-called “auxiliary sciences,” see Blandine Barret-Kriegel’s edition of Jean Mabillon, Brèves réflexions sur quelques règles de l’histoire (Paris, 1990).
definition of a medieval diplomatic original is a document extant as a single parchment and exhibiting signs of validation (Figs. 1, 2, 12). Thus the characteristics of an original reside mainly in its format and in its physical aspect. In seeking to identify those qualities which separate originals from copies, the discipline of diplomatics has promulgated a theoretical principle that situates and substantiates authenticity itself within the physical uniqueness of original documents. Medieval scribes, however, those who undertook the actual work of reproduction, seem not to have been so concerned with unique and authentic originals in the same sense that Mabillon was. Indeed, the very signs identified by Mabillon and retained by subsequent generations of diplomatists as undoubted markers of authenticity—e.g., seals, handwriting, dates, chirographic inscriptions, lists of witnesses—were actually de-emphasized by medieval copyists (Fig. 13). It is possible that memory alone was the principal antecedent of deeds recorded in charters of confirmation, pancartes, or cartulary entries. Furthermore, in a certain sense, every diplomatic text, whatever its format, has a claim to originality since it is a unique, handcrafted artifact. Any preexisting text from which a copy was made might thus have served as an exemplar. There seems to have been no equivalent to our modern concept of an “original” in the medieval lexicon, where the word *authenticum*, when used to refer to a charter or diploma, simply invoked its authority, not its temporal primacy. Originality can be a matter of authenticity, authority, or priority. How then are we to arrive at the medieval understanding of documentary originality which, I am suggesting, is possibly something other than the Ur-text posited by Mabillon? I propose here to examine the medieval concepts of “copy” and “original” by looking at the filiation of three groups of documents initially produced in northern France before 1200: first, all the *acta* given for and by the chapter of Saint-Fursy of Péronne; second, all the *acta* given for and by the abbey of Notre-Dame of Homblières; and third, all the *acta* given in the name of the counts of Ponthieu. The data of interest thus originate north of Paris, mainly in Picardy. In the case of the comital

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