



Publié sur *La Vie des Classiques* (<https://96.ip-213-32-20.eu>)

[Accueil](#) > An ancient handbook of short-hand: Tironian notes and the “*Commentarii notarum Tironianarum*”

AN ANCIENT HANDBOOK OF SHORT-HAND: TIRONIAN NOTES AND THE “COMMENTARII NOTARUM TIRONIANARUM”

A new article at the British Library Manuscripts blog, Emilia Henderson, “[Note-worthy connections: antique shorthand in Carolingian books](#)”,^[1] discusses an obscure ancient text, the *Commentarii notarum Tironianarum*, or *Lexicon Tironianum*. This is a handbook of short-hand, giving the symbols with the Latin word or phrase that they represent.

Bernard Bischoff wrote:

The name covers the many layers of material that we have in the *Commentarii notarum tironianarum* (CNT), a list of roughly 13,000 signs with their explanations, and in examples of their practical use as shorthand in many early medieval manuscripts and charters.

According to a credible statement by Isidore of Seville, M. Tullius Tiro, a freedman of Cicero’s, was the inventor of a basic corpus of signs that made writing from dictation easier for him. Other personalities of the first century BC and of the first century AD developed and expanded the system, amongst them Seneca (probably the philosopher). To the *Commentarii* that have been transmitted to us special lists of signs for names and concepts were added subsequently (among them Christian ones, which must belong to the latest additions, perhaps from the fourth century).^[2]

There are something like 20 manuscripts of the *Commentarii notarum Tironianarum*, and a good number are online. Here are some that I was able to locate.

- [British Library Additional 21164](#) – Here fol. 2v begins “De notis Militaribus”, and ends with “Incipiunt Notae Senecae”, before we get the title page on fol. 3r.:

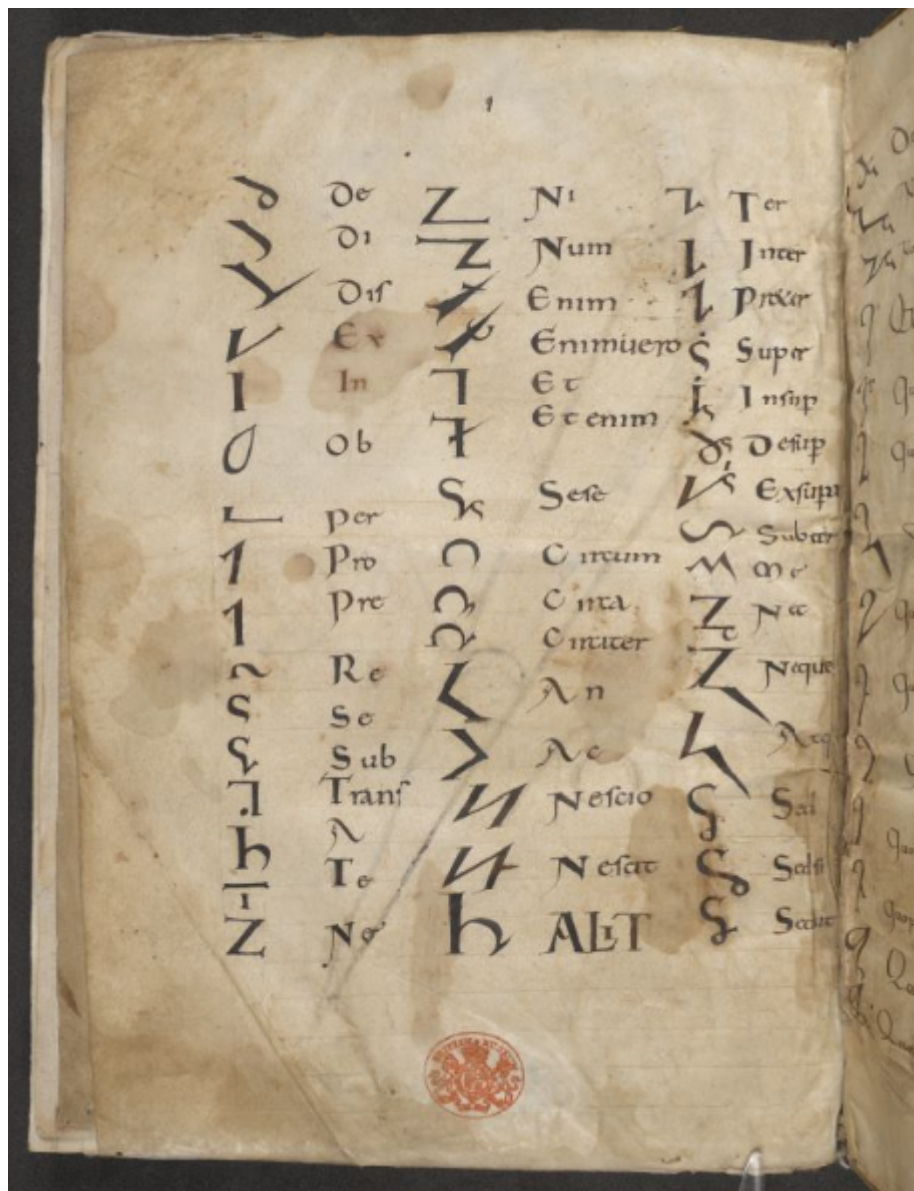


BL. Add. 21164, folio 3r.

- [British Library Additional 37518](#) - 1st quarter of the 9th century. French.



Fol. 1r.



Fol. 1v

- [Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale Francais, latin 7493](#). This is a scanned microfilm:

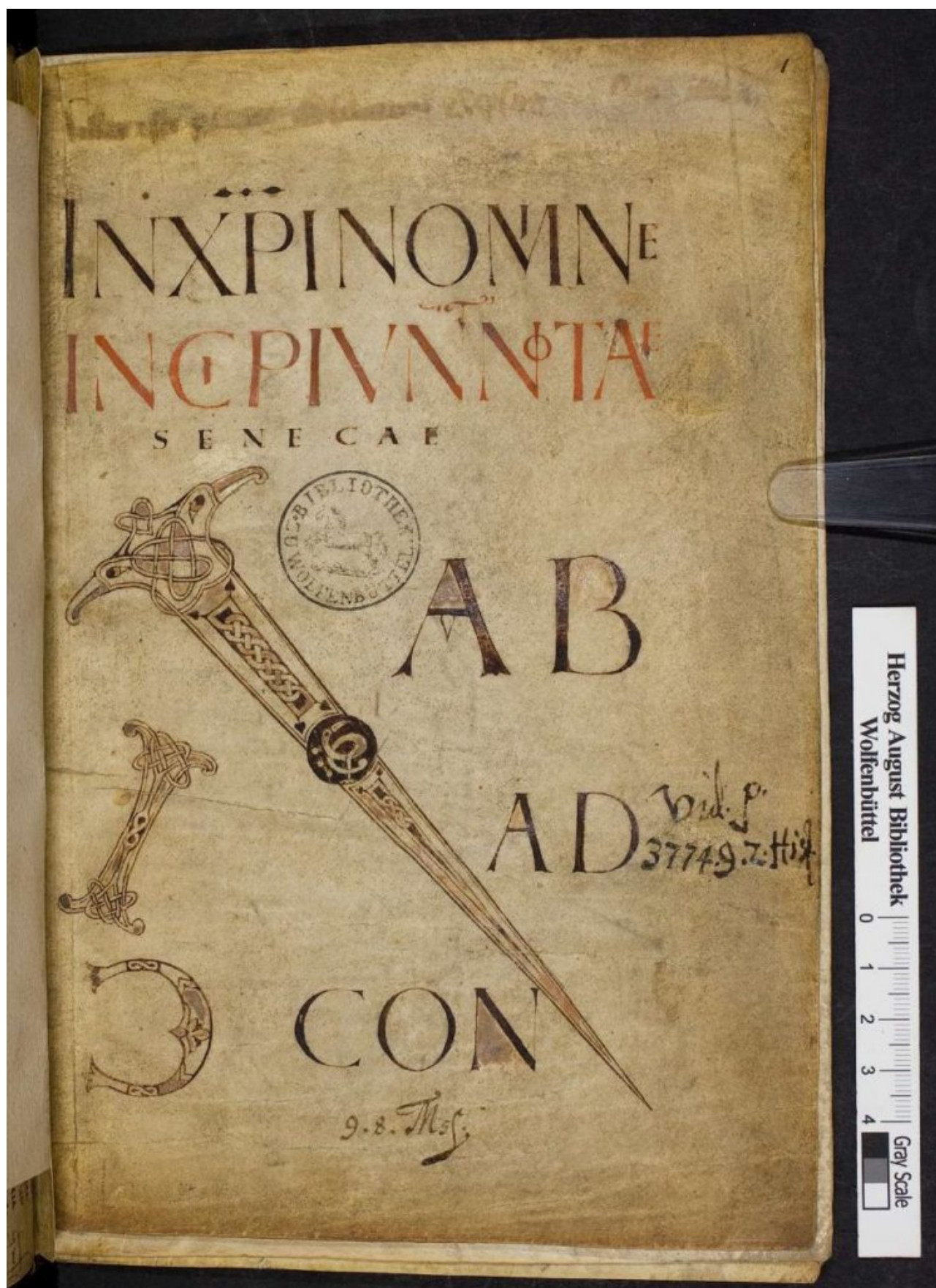


BNF latin 8779, fol. 15r.

- [Vatican latin 3799](#).



- [Wolfenbüttel, Cod. Guelf. 9.8 Aug. 4°; Heinemann-Nr. 2989.](#)



Wolfenbüttel 9-8-aug-4f

All these manuscripts are from the 9th century, I believe. They show a common motif at the beginning, the dagger. Some give a whole page, others abbreviate it; but perhaps it

suggests that they derive from a common ancestor which was laid out like this. I read somewhere that the tironian notae are used extensively in the post-Roman Merovingian period, becoming increasingly corrupt, but are then restored at the start of the Carolingian period by the discovery of a late-antique exemplar, from which these copies derive. Unfortunately I do not have the reference for this claim.

There is an edition of the *Commentarii notarum Tironianarum* available, by W. Schmitz (1893),^[1] and it may found downloaded from [Archive.org here](#). P. Legendre, *Etudes tironiennes, Paris. (IV. Les manuscrits tironiens)*, 1907, contains a list of 21 manuscripts of the work, and is also online at [Archive.org here](#). R.M. Sheldon, *Espionage in the Ancient World*, 2015, p.90 ([preview here](#)) gives a bibliography and advises the reader to look at this work:

Herbert Boge, *Griechische Tachygraphie und Tironische Noten: Ein Handbuch der antiken und mittelalterlichen Schnellschrift*. Boge begins with definitions of Tachygraphy (stenography) then goes on to discuss the examples found in the Greek world from the fourth century be including the Acropolis system, the consonant tables from Delphi, and examples from the second and first century BC. He then goes on to discuss Tironian notes and Roman shorthand writing. He includes an excellent bibliography.

It is, sadly, offline; and in German, so perhaps no loss.

The tironian notae may seem an old and obscure subject. Yet they remain in use even today, in Southern Ireland. The nota for “et”, ꝥ, looking like a small numeral seven, is in unicode. An Irish blogger, Stan Carey, posted this use on a street sign, as well as other examples in his post, [“The Tironian et \(ꝥ\) in Galway, Ireland”](#).



How fascinating to see such a survival!

1. ^[1]12th August, 2019.↵

2. ^[2]Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. p.80. Preview [here](#).↵

3. ^[3]I did attempt to transcribe the prologue, probably not well: “Incipit de vulgaribus

notis quomodo prius inventae sunt. Vulgares notas ennius primus mille & centum invenit notarum. Usus erat repertus ut quicquid pro contentione aut iniudicis divisim inserere oartibus quod quisque verba et quo ordine exciperet. Romae primus Tullius tyro ciceronis libertus commentator est notas. Sed tantum praepositio num; postcum tertius vipersammius philargius et aquila lib.tus mecenatis alius alias addiderunt. Deinde Seneca contractoque et aucto numero opus efficit in quique milia. Notae autem dictae eo quod verba vel syllabas praefixis characteribus notent, ut ad notitiam legentium revocent; quas qui didicerint. Propriae iam notarii appellantur. Explicit prologus de vulgaribus notis.”↩

4. ¹⁴¹*Commentarii notarum tironianarum cum prolegomenis adnotationibus criticis et exegeticis notarumque indice alphabetico : edidit Guilelmus Schmitz.*↩
