

# Building the Penitentiary Document Corpus (PeDoCo) for NLP: Balancing Data Complexity and Uniform Data Structure

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## Abstract

This paper describes the process of creating a TEI XML corpus of late medieval Latin documents for NLP tasks from books in PDF format. The documents of the Apostolic Penitentiary (a tribunal of the Catholic Church responsible for granting absolutions, dispensations, and indulgences) have been originally published as printed books. For the purposes of this corpus, they were derived from PDF files used for proofreading before printing. These editions, containing 1,511 documents and 211,398 words, are designed by and for human scholars engaged in close reading. As a result, they encode implicit semantic information through typographical features such as page layout and italics, which are sometimes inconsistent. Although human readers, equipped with holistic understanding, can interpret such variations, NLP tools require unambiguous, text-only input.

We report in detail the process of transforming the PDF editions into a structured, machine-readable, and openly accessible corpus. Our approach combines a rule-based workflow using regular expressions with close reading and manual corrections. Such conversion procedures, which are highly time-consuming and require in-depth knowledge of medieval Latin philology and manuscript studies, are regrettably seldom made explicit, despite their vital role in ensuring the reproducibility and scalability of research.

## Keywords

corpus creation, TEI XML, implicit information, computational linguistics, medieval Latin

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the process of creating a structured TEI XML corpus of 1,511 medieval Latin documents, which are released as an open-access language resource under the name Penitentiary Document Corpus (PeDoCo), accompanied by all the code <sup>1</sup> required for conversion, at FIN-CLARIN [<https://clarino.uib.no/comedi/editor/lb-2024031201>] upon publication of this paper. The paper first describes the documentary data and then explains

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<sup>1</sup>Code with comments <https://github.com/HannaKoo/PeDoCo>

**Table 1**

Document and word counts of the PeDoCo.

	England/Wales	Sweden	Norway	Total
Documents in Latin	913	453	145	1,511
Words in Latin	129,879	61,174	20,345	211,398

its conversion from PDF editions into TEI XML [<https://tei-c.org/>].

All textual information given within the running Latin text as well as all relevant metadata provided in the PDF editions have been converted into respective TEI XML elements and attributes by applying a complex labour-intensive rule-based procedure built on iterations of a vast number of regular expressions and manual corrections.

The resulting PeDoCo corpus offers a novel open-access dataset for the computational study of non-literary late medieval Latin while also serving as an easily searchable digital resource for historians. Few well-structured digital resources exist for linguistic, socio-historical, and legal-historical studies of the Middle Ages, and none specifically address the highly significant and abundant genre of late medieval papal documents. This work, therefore, establishes a foundation for the future organization and annotation of similar medieval document collections.

The PeDoCo serves as optimal input for various computational linguistics tasks on medieval Latin, e.g., named entity recognition. Other future linguistic analyses, like exploring language change, will require a further enrichment of the text with automated parsers: lemmatization and morpho-syntactic annotation are vital to study a highly inflected language like Latin.

A linguistically annotated corpus rich in contextual metadata will lend itself not only to context-aware grammatical queries, but also to lemma-based keyword searches and the *ad hoc* creation of filtered subcorpora, e.g., listing all the documents related to marriages by the type of petition “*De matrimonialibus*”. Indeed, a semantically enriched resource like the PeDoCo which takes into consideration the diplomatic details of the text, such as original scribal deletions and insertions, has an advantage over most language resources that simply remove everything that is not running text: systematic metadata allow for a detailed study of textual history and scribal practices, in terms of chronological trends in the use of specific linguistic constructions or scribal emendation techniques.

## 2. Previous studies

The Penitentiary documents have mainly been studied by historians in the recent decades. Especially, social history has been interested in the freely composed narrative and explanatory sections that shed light on the everyday lives of people from various social strata. For a concise summary of the studies related to the Penitentiary and its documentary production, see (Wollmann 2021). Linguistic studies on the data are lacking so far.

Language resources are occasionally built out of printed editions, provided that they are of high importance and quality. One undertaking that resembles the present study is the conversion into a language resource of the originally printed and subsequently OCRed *Lexicon Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis Polonorum*, the dictionary of medieval and later Latin from Polish sources (Nowak 2014). Another recent example is the aligned corpus of Latin and Middle English medical

treatises on plague, in which specific textual sections, such as recipes, are distinguished from the running text, and abbreviation and word division practices are systematically disentangled using TEI XML (Honkapohja and Suomela 2022). Other uses of XML include the EpiDoc collaboration, which focuses mainly on encoding epigraphic documents (see [<https://epidoc.stoa.org/>]).

Like the Penitentiary editions, this dictionary coded most semantic information about the lexical entries by conventional formatting, which the creators of the e-lexicon turned into semantic annotation as XML tags by applying a complex conversion procedure to all the originally visually encoded components. The Charter Encoding Initiative (CEI) [<https://www.cei.lmu.de>] maintains a tag library for the diplomatic annotation of medieval charters. Our tagset shares those tags with CEI that are pertinent to our manuscript-based data.

### 3. Data

The PeDoCo consists of 1,511 documents written and registered at the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome between 1410 and 1531. Together they comprise 211,398 words in Latin (Table 1).

The Apostolic Penitentiary is a papal office that provided various types of licenses and absolutions for the Catholics all over Europe. People who had violated the Canon Law, the most important piece of legislation within the Roman Catholic Church, applied for absolution from the Penitentiary, which kept records of accepted applications for internal reference (Salonen 2001).

The documents, only opened to researchers in the 1980s, are important evidence of both medieval legal Latin and social history. Documents related to cases taken place in what are now modern countries of Belgium, Italy, Germany, Sweden (Risberg and Salonen 2008), England and Wales (Clarke and Zutshi 2013, 2014; Clarke, Zutshi, and Wilson-Lee 2015) and Norway (Jørgensen and Saletnich 2004) have been edited and published so far. This paper covers the documents from Sweden, England, Wales and Norway. The editors of the Swedish and English/Welsh documents generously granted the permission to utilize their PDF proofreading copies, while the editors of the Norwegian documents provided an already plain-text version of the edition.

Each document copied in the Penitentiary registers consists of a protocol (conventional greeting clause), context (main factual contents: a more or less freely composed explanation of the events or request) and an eschatocol (formulaic closing remarks of appreciation and the attestation of those responsible for the hearing) (Wollmann 2021). It is widely known that such diplomatic sections differ in their language use (Sabatini 1965), so they were encoded in the PeDoCo documents.

The petitions to the Penitentiary can be divided into thematic categories already utilized by the medieval officials. The thematic category is crucial metadata because petition type resulted in different practices regarding their documentation into registries and, consequently, in different language use. The complex cases under the heading ‘diverse matters’ (*De diversis formis*) and declarations concerning clearing of one’s reputation (*De declaratoriis*) are copied with care in full, while many routine cases provide only the barest details: the extremely common applications for dispensation to marry (*De matrimonialibus*) are heavily abbreviated. In fact, several repeated formulaic expressions are abbreviated even in the more complex cases,

and the modern editors' practices vary regarding whether they print the omitted parts of the abbreviated words in the running text. The shortest document in the corpus being 12 and the longest 1,285 words highlights the diversity.

## 4. Conversion and enrichment procedure

The process of structuring the PeDoCo corpus with XML tags can be summarized by the following three c's: catch, clean and capsulate. The conversion of the PDF editions into TEI XML was an iterative process which combined continuous close reading of the PDF editions (sometimes even the printed volumes) and automated structuring in terms of regular expressions.

**Catch.** The point of departure for the conversion process was the proofreading copies of the three Penitentiary document editions. After experimenting with opening the PDF documents in various programs and by different methods, Microsoft Word proved the best option for preserving the versatile formattings (italics, font sizes and types, page layout) of the PDF editions. This was vital for the search tools to be able to catch the structural information conveyed by the formatting. However, the Microsoft Word conversion to DOCX had losses: in the Swedish documents some hyphens and formatting were recovered manually from the printed volumes.

**Clean.** Since the aim was not to provide a faithful digital copy of the PDF editions, the conversion process involved a removal of several types of information given in the PDF editions as superfluous for NLP purposes. While no doubt useful in qualitative historical research, all information given in footnotes regarding persons involved, previous studies, as well as the English translations and regestas (systematic summaries of historical documents, typically providing essential information on the content) were removed.

**Capsulate.** Finally, the strings that were caught and cleaned were capsulated in XML tags by specific scripts. In sum, the conversion workflow was carried out between Microsoft Word and Visual Studio Code and consisted of a complex interplay of catching formatted strings with the find and replace function, iterated regular expressions and manual corrections.

### 4.1. Conversion and enrichment of metadata

The Penitentiary document editions present most metadata types in terms of their location on the page combined with special formatting (Figure 1). This section presents the metadata types available in all the PeDoCo documents: original edition-document identifier, source, the PeDoCo document identifier, ISO formatted date, place of issue and type of petition. Not all these metadata types were present in all the PDF editions. The missing data were generated manually or semi-automatically.

The **original document numbers** of each document were caught by targeting their formatting with Microsoft Word find and replace function, processed by custom scripts and subsequently capsulated by merging them into a single string with the title of each Penitentiary document edition. This resulted in XML representations, such as `<onum="23" source="EW">` for the document 23 of the English/Welsh edition. A few cases had to be corrected manually: the so-called collective (bundle) entries in the Swedish edition and, due to human errors or incongruous formatting choices, eight cases in the documents from England and Wales. The

document numbers of the Norwegian documents, already in plain text, were caught by matching a line beginning followed by a number and a space.

In addition, a novel **PeDoCo document identifier** (e.g., `<text n="300">`) was introduced for each document for project-internal purposes due to the bundled entries. Documents were often abbreviated to the extreme, understandably so, given the cost of materials and the manual nature of writing, as well as the repetitive use of formulaic expressions that provided no new information. Only consultation of the originals in the Penitentiary Archive sheds light on the diverse practices employed by scribes at different points in time, which the editors have rendered in the bundle entries as accurately as possible in text format. For the Swedish cases, typographical information on the folio is given by the editor in the apparatus, e.g. 1 'In the upper margin of folio 245 recto'. This approach of dealing with bundle entries is necessary to maintain a meaningful syntactic structure for linguistic analysis.

For the Swedish documents, the **dates**, which were given in the PDF edition in the form of (D)D. (M)M YYYY (e.g., 28.5 1410), were converted into the ISO format by matching them using the find and replace iteratively and finally converting the remaining inconsistent cases by hand (e.g., `<date when="1410-05-28">`). The dates of the English and Welsh documents were converted from the format (D)D MONTH YYYY (e.g., 5 March 1443) using a script. The plain-text version of the Norwegian documents only quotes medieval dates based on the Roman calendar and papal regnal year. The corresponding modern dates were manually typed in from the printed book.

**Place of issue** is always the last item on the row that constitutes the document title in the Swedish edition. It was easily matched using a set of regular expressions. The English and Welsh documents always display this information immediately after the document numbering, where it was again matched with a regular expression. For the Norwegian edition place of issue was added manually. The place names were then capsulated between `<placeName>` tags.

As for the **type of petition**, the Swedish edition has an appendix with each document classified according to its petition type (Section 3). This class information was converted into XML tags, e.g., `<text type="matrimonialibus">`, by using a script that matched the original document number in the appendix. The English and Welsh documents include subtitles with information, such as "*De defectu natalium in prima forma*", which was easily added as metadata in each document using a script. The Norwegian edition has the document type last on the title row of each document, so it was easy to catch and capsulate.

Figure 1 illustrates the relation between the above-discussed metadata types and their original encoding as layout and formatting.

Once the page-level formatting indicative of the metadata had been converted into relevant XML tags, it was possible to start catching, cleaning and capsulating the information presented as various types of formatting inside the Latin edition text proper. This formatting encodes diplomatic information about the original text of the documents, i.e., scribal omissions and additions as well as editorial interventions related to them.

The most important issue for the Swedish documents was to match the strings in italics, which stand for the **editorial additions** of parts omitted by the medieval scribe, mostly formulae. As was seen in section 3, the Penitentiary documents are highly formulaic, and the most repetitive parts of the documentary formulae were often not written down. These passages, typically restored by modern editors, were capsulated in the

**Figure 1:** A simplified and highlighted print screen example of one document and its XML encoding:  
`<text n="300" source="AP" onum="348" type="diversis" bundle="n" several_witnesses="n"><front>  
<docDate><date when="1495-09-15"/></docDate> <placeName type="place-issue">Rome</placeName>  
</front><body><p>... <choice><corr>Aboensis</corr>  
<sic>Aboensis</sic></choice> <supplied reason="omitted-unintentional">diocesis</supplied>  
<supplied reason="omitted-intentional">exponit </supplied>...</p>  
</body></text>`  
Additional examples of entire documents from each edition are given in the Appendix.

	348	15.9 1495	Rome
45:245r		Michael Theobaldi presbyter plebanus in Uskela Aboensis <diocesis> exponit, quod ipse olim quadam speciali excommunicationis sententia in eum ordinaria auctoritate lata tamquam simplex et iurisignarus non tamen in contemptum clavium divina celebravit officia et alias se	
		...   348 Anno quarto domini Alexandri pape sexti in marg. sup. fol. 245r; Rome apud Sanctum Petrum in marg. sup. fol. 245v; Rome xvii Kalendas Octobris in marg. sin. fol. 245r; Aboensis diocesis in marg. dext. fol. 245r.   348,1 Aboensis  Aboensis cod.	

<supplied reason="omitted-intentional"> tags. The text that the scribe had omitted by mistake and that the editors have been able to restore were encoded with <supplied reason="omitted-unintentional">. The text that is missing due to a damage of the original document but that is restorable by inference from context was marked with <supplied reason="lost">. If the editors have not been able to restore a damaged string, its place was tagged with <unclear reason="illegible">.

The editors of the Swedish documents exclude from the text proper a few superfluous and/or incorrect words that the medieval scribes have produced by mistake. The PeDoCo encodes such **editorial deletions** with <surplus resp="editorial">. Yet, even medieval scribes crossed out words in their documents when they noticed their own mistakes. The edition of England and Wales indicates such **scribal deletions** with strike-through. These cases were caught and capsulated by using the <del> tags.

The Latin text of the Norwegian documents does not contain editorial emendations, except for the **expansions of abbreviations**. The angle brackets, which the edition uses to mark abbreviations, were replaced with <ex> tags, e.g., D<ex>ominicus</ex>.

Finally, the information about the **diplomatic sections** (protocol, context, eschatocol; see Section 3) was converted. It was possible to catch the sections by targeting the page layout in the editions of England/Wales and Norway, while they had to be manually generated and encoded in the Swedish edition which was lacking their representation as distinct paragraphs.

Each section was capsulated by wrapping it between <seg> tags specified by the name of the section in question, e.g., <seg type="protocol">.

It has to be noticed that the Latin text published in the PeDoCo essentially reproduces the editorial choices of the PDF editions, even when the editors' principles are conflicting. The Swedish edition mostly retains the original word forms of the Latin text, whether standard or non-standard. Thus, non-standard forms that can be considered spelling variants (e.g., *dyocesis* instead of *diocesis* 'diocese') as well as scribal errors due to inattention (i.e., typos, e.g., *cutellum* instead of *cultellum* 'knife') are usually kept in the text, and the latter are normalized in the apparatus (e.g., text: *cutellum*, apparatus: *cultellum*). Those forms, instead, that the editors think may cause confusion are normalized in the text. This mainly applies to morpho-syntactic errors, such as the genitive *plebani* instead of the nominative *plebanus* 'parish priest', and to the scribe having accidentally mistaken the entire word for another, such as *cavabantur* 'they were excavated' instead of *conabantur* 'they tried'. In such cases, the original reading is only provided in the apparatus (e.g., text: *plebanus*, apparatus: *plebani*). In the edition of the English and Welsh documents, instead, **editorial normalizations and corrections** are given in square brackets within the non-normalized running text. These editorial emendations are the only ones related to the Latin text as it is encoded in the PeDoCo. They are marked using <choice><corr>Aboensis</corr><sic>Abonsis</sic></choice>.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper presented the process of building a language resource out of books in PDF format meant for human readers. The main challenge in constructing this Penitentiary Document Corpus (PeDoCo, see FIN-CLARIN [<https://clarino.uib.no/comedi/editor/lb-2024031201>]) was to convert the human-readable implicit information conveyed by various typographical means into the machine-readable TEI XML format that would qualify for input to NLP tasks. This required a complex iterative procedure based on a vast number of regular expressions and manual corrections. The resulting data structure figures five types of metadata and nine main types of textual-diplomatic data encoded by XML elements and attributes. The PeDoCo can be used both by computational linguistics and traditional historical-philological scholarship. Existing parsers don't perform well enough to provide a reliable linguistic analysis of the PeDoCo so future prospects include developing parsers for enriching the PeDoCo with lemmatization and morpho-syntactic information. This includes manually annotating an evaluation dataset from the PeDoCo, as well as experimenting with different parsers to decide on the methods to provide the best accuracy.

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## Appendix

Examples of documents from each region. The entire database is available at FIN-CLARIN  
<https://clarino.uib.no/comedi/editor/lb-2024031201>.

```
<text n="9" source="AP" onum="9" type="promotis" bundle="n"
  several_witnesses="n">
<front><docDate><date when="1439-03-05"/></docDate></front>
<body>
<p>
<div type="protocol">Beatissime pater!</div>
<div type="context">Exponitur sanctitati vestre pro parte
devoti vestri Ioseph Arneri, clerici Scarensis diocesis, quod,
cum ipse zelo devotionis accensus desideret ad omnes ordines
promoveri et in eisdem perpetuo altissimo Domino celebrando et
ministrando famulari, <del>sed</del> quia impedimento, quod
ipse aliquantulum pollicem manus sinistre habet diminuatam
<choice>
  <orig>e ex</orig>
  <sic resp="Risberg">e</sic>
</choice> causa cuiusdam laici, qui cum eo questionem faciebat
et cum dentibus in parte interiori scindit et mordivit
casualiter, licet bene habet pollicem cum
<choice>
  <orig>unga</orig>
  <sic resp="Risberg">ungue</sic>
</choice>, <del>sed</del> modica difformitas in eo apparet,
quapropter desiderium huiusmodi in hac parte commode adimplere
non <add>potest</add>, nisi apostolice sedis suffragetur
auxilio. Idcirco supplicat eidem sanctitati vestre idem Ioseph,
quatenus, <add>ut</add> predicto impedimento non obstante ad
dictos ordines promoveri et in eisdem, postquam promotus
fuerit, libere recipere et licite ministrare et celebrari
possit et valeat, secum dispensari mandare dignemini de gratia
vestra speciali.</div> <div type="escatocol">Concessum de
speciali et committatur ordinario in presentiadomini
cardinalis. Petrus.</div></p>
</body>
</text>
```

```
<text n="396" source="EW" onum="1" type="natalium" pope="Alexander V"
  >
<front>
<docDate><date when="1410-04-08"/>
<placeName type="place-issue">Bologna</placeName></docDate>
</front>
<body>
<p><add>Bononie</add>, vi idus Aprilis. <div type="context">
```

Supplicatur sanctitati vestre pro parte devoti vestri Thome Cullurdonse, presbiteri, perpetui vicarii parrochialis ecclesie de Diseworch', Lincolniensis diocesis, cum quo alias ut non obstante defectu natalium quem patitur de soluto genitus et soluta et ad omnes ordines promoveri et beneficium ecclesiasticum etiam si curam habeat animarum <add>obtinere posset</add> auctoritate apostolica fuit dispensatum, cuius vigore dispensationis se fecit ad omnes ordines promoveri et dictam parrochialem ecclesiam est assecutus, quatinus sibi uberiores gratias facientes ut unum aliud ecclesiasticum beneficium una cum dicta vicaria posset licite retinere, ex causa permutationis vel alias simul vel successive totiens quotiens sibi videbitur dimittere et loco dimissi vel dimissorum aliud vel alia similia <add><i>sic</i></add> simile vel dissimile aut similia vel dissimilia beneficium seu beneficia, unum vel duo dumtaxat alia beneficia ecclesiastica, etiam si eorum alterum curatum, libere recipere et licite retinere valeat dignemini misericorditer dispensare, Pictavensi consilio non obstante et aliis constitutionibus et statutis etc. in contrarium editis non obstantibus quibuscumque de gratia speciali.</div></p>

<p type="escatocol">Fiat de speciali ad unum et quod semel.</p></body></text>

<text n="1322" source="SP" onum="15" type="diversis"><front><docDate><date when="1479-01-22"/></docDate></front><body><p type="context">Iohannes Iacobi presbiter Nidrosiensis diocesis <add>exponit</add> quatenus ipse causa devotionis sepe missam celebrare desiderat, sed sepe contingit ipsum ad diversas mundi partes declinare, quare huiusmodi desiderium suum adimplere non valeat. Supplicat etc. quatenus sibi constitutionibus et ordinibus provincialibus et synodalibus non obstantibus in quacumque diocesi, ubi ipsum declinare contigerit, missam celebrare possit, misericorditer licentiam impartiri dignemini de gratia speciali.</p><div type="escatocol"><p>Fiat de speciali sine preiudicio, Iul<add>ianus</add>, titularis Sancti Petri ad Vincula.</p><p><placeName type="place-issue">Rome</placeName> apud Sanctum Petrum, xi kal. febr. anno octavo domini Sixti pape iiii.</p></div></body></text>